

PHILOSOPHY OF BEHAVIORISM

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ABSTRACT

The following article examines several components of the behavioral approach to psychology. It describes its main characteristics; analyses its philosophical principles; details its methodological practices; explores its chief strengths and weaknesses; acknowledges its application in other fields, particularly in education and advertising; analyses of a significant and well-known experiment, 'Little Albert'; and weaves together all these constituents, thereby providing a holistic review of behavioral psychology.

Keywords: Philosophy, Psychology, Behaviorism

1. INTRODUCTION

For centuries, humans have been captivated by the mechanisms of the human mind. Philosophers and physiologists contemplated the questions that psychology, as an independent science, currently addresses. Psychology is the study of mind and behavior, both in humans and animals. While the sub-disciplines of this science abound, there exists a school of psychology that exclusively investigates behavior; in fact, its name, behavioral psychology, exposes its principal interest. An examination of its main characteristics, philosophy, methodology, strengths, weaknesses, applications, contemporary scholarship and research, and the connections between these aspects provides a fuller understanding of this controversial yet influential realm of psychology.

2. BEHAVIORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Behavioral psychology, otherwise known as behaviorism, holds the view that overt actions are the only respectable phenomena available for psychological investigation. Conversely, behaviorists reject

internal psychological activity as a subject of study; mental processes simply do not exist. In other words, introspection is discarded and objectivity is embraced. As such, behaviorists embark upon scholarship that employs only purely tangible and readily manipulated actions. There is an underlying sense of practicality within the behaviorist school. Behaviorism endeavors to predict and control human action. In addition, it strives to identify universal principles of learning (Morris & Maisto, 2002, p. 16). In order to wholly appreciate the significance of behaviorism, one must consider the historical context in which it developed. Behavioral psychology, with its roots in the earlier part of the twentieth century, emerged as a revolt against the more introspective discipline of psychoanalysis. This movement surfaced during the 1920s and alleged dissatisfaction with the then prevailing school of psychology (psychoanalysis), claiming the latter discredited psychology's validity as a science since it espoused unscientific practices. Considering this, it is not surprising that behaviorism's philosophical framework is in direct contrast with that of the psychoanalytical approach. In fact, it is reasonable to proclaim behaviorism the antithesis of psychoanalysis. A salient and integral feature of behavioral philosophy is its belief that psychology, in order to be rightfully considered a natural science, must abide by the practices to which other established sciences (i.e., biology and chemistry) already adhere. Watson, considered the father of behaviorism, advocated the elimination of psychological research whose results were not a consequence of direct observation. What's more, behaviorists regard abstract constructs meaningless; therefore, thought, mind, and emotion lie outside the scope of behavioral psychology. Behaviorists reason that concepts such as consciousness cannot be coherently characterized. In the absence of a meaningful definition, they wonder how scientists can possibly study it.

3. BEHAVIORIST PHILOSOPHY

The purpose of this severe philosophy is to render psychology a science whose experiments can be replicated. The foundation upon which a creditable science rests is the ability of its research findings to be affirmed or refuted by the results of subsequent inquiries. Simply stated, this allows for the advancement of a discipline. Without replication, manipulation, and extension of research, science is stunted. Behaviorists acknowledge this axiom and aim to promote the science of psychology by cleaving to sound scientific principles.

Another aspect of behaviorist philosophy is its belief in natural laws (DeMar, 1998, p. 1). Behavioral psychology maintains that human conduct is subject to organic rules. Moreover, such laws are observable and measurable and are only visible through concrete events. Congruent with this logic, behaviorists declare that human actions are simply responses to external stimuli (DeMar, p. 1). This tenet implicitly reveals another presumption of behaviorist philosophy: an organism's behavioral patterns are an immediate result of cumulative environmental influences.

According to behaviorist philosophy, at birth human beings are the proverbial blank slate, or *tabula rasa*. As mentioned, behaviorists do not believe in mankind's soul or mind; such notions are not palpable and therefore immaterial to behavioral scientists.

Instead, behaviorist theory asserts that learning is equivalent to conditioning; that is, the basis of human knowledge springs from its interaction with and experience of the environment. This perspective characterizes behavior as a solely biological function (DeMar, p. 1). By integrating these principles, behaviorist philosophy views humans as biological automatons who do not willfully act; who merely respond to stimuli; who learn exclusively through an environmental medium; and who are products of their surroundings.

In accordance with the concept that humans are well-ordered machines (Morris & Maisto, p. 16), it logically follows that behaviorists assume conduct to be predictable. Through astute observation of environmental conditions and ensuing measurable reactions, behavioral psychologists detect causal relationships. Specifically, behaviorists present stimuli and observe their correspondent responses. Repeated experiments may uncover behavioral patterns; this leads to theories about future behavior.

As acknowledged previously, behavioral psychology is outcome oriented. Consequently, it is not unexpected that its main objective is manipulation of human behavior.

Therefore, in addition to anticipating actions, behaviorists believe that conduct can be controlled. To this end, investigative practices include manipulating variables and documenting resultant behaviors.

Furnished with the outcomes of such experiments, behavioral psychologists modify human actions via conditioning. That is, new behavior or learning is facilitated through a proscribed set of circumstances.

To reiterate, the research practices of behavioral psychology rests firmly in the experimental method. This research technique involves an experimenter's deliberate manipulation of variables and their corresponding effects on participants' consequent behaviors (Morris & Maisto, p. 33). The process begins with a researcher's hypothesis, an untested theory about an observable phenomenon. The investigator then designs the experiment (i.e., environmental conditions and the study's procedures) and selects the participants. Typically, subjects are placed in one of two groups—the experimental group or the control group. The former is exposed to an independent variable while the latter is not. Naturally, the experimental group's responses to the independent variable are the focal points of the study; such reactions are termed dependent variables. If utilized, the control group functions as the base line from which the experimental group is compared. A shrewd analysis of the study's outcomes allows the experimenter to draw rational conclusions. Finally, the research is publicly disclosed with the purpose of extending existent scholarship.

It is expected that behavioral psychologists employ the experimental method in their research activities. The reason for this choice is straightforward: it accurately reflects the philosophical presuppositions of the school of behavioral psychology. The experimental method readily supplies researchers environments in which overt actions are easily manipulated. After constructing a hypothesis and prediction, behavioral scientists devise experiments in which stimuli (independent variables) are presented to subjects. Participants' responses (dependent variables) are then documented. This investigative procedure allows behaviorists to deduce cause-and-effect relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variables. Such an approach to research underscores many philosophical assumptions of behavioral psychology.

First, the experimental method is analogous to the scientific method; the latter is the typical methodology of most natural sciences. Since the principal goal of behaviorism is to transform psychology into a true science, it is not surprising that its adherents embrace an investigative procedure similar to that of mature natural sciences. Therefore, by adopting the experimental method as psychology's *modus operandi*, behaviorists believe the discipline can be justly regarded as a respectable science.

Secondly, the allure of the experimental method largely resides in its reproducible quality. As cited, this is an important component of the behaviorist school of thought. In other words, if an experiment does not easily lend itself to duplication, it has no standing in behavioral psychology. As maintained by behaviorists, psychological studies using the experimental method can be efficiently repeated (as opposed to case studies, which are inherently unique situations), thereby boosting the credibility and validity of the field.

Furthermore, the experimental method folds nicely into the philosophical framework of behaviorism in that it allows for the direct manipulation of overt behavior. This practice supports the behavioral assumption that human action is affected by manipulation; it affirms the cause-and-effect relationship that exists between behavior and the environment. The central theory of behavioral psychology is the absolute impact of the atmosphere on conduct. By isolating an individual behavior and instituting an environmental modification (independent variable), the resultant behavioral change (dependent variable) sensibly arises from this manipulation; such is the reasoning of behavioral scientists. This logic and its correspondent proof certify the validity of behavioral science.

There are several intrinsic strengths in the school of behaviorism. First and foremost, behavioral science produces concrete results. Because it deals exclusively with tangible phenomena, its studies deliver explicit outcomes. Said differently, its research produces measurable conclusions. This authorizes other professionals to smoothly replicate behavioral scholarship. In addition, behaviorists clearly define objectives. As clarity is the cornerstone of this psychological discipline, it is not surprising that its adherents strive for precision in their work. It also isolates, examines, and manipulates a single variable. This leads to manageable outcomes. Manageable data enables others to better understand behavioral research findings.

As with most psychological theories, there are those who object; behaviorism is no exception. In fact, it has been the target of severe criticism, both within the professional community and without. Its chief

weakness revolves around its narrow scope; it simply ignores phenomena such as emotion, instinct, and cognitive processes, not to mention self-actualization and language development. In essence, behaviorism reduces humans to mere automatons; they do not possess minds but instead are manipulated by environmental input. Within its strict perspective of humanity, there is no room for free will; actions are automatic responses to prompts from one's surroundings. It goes without saying that behaviorists do not allow for mankind's soul; this does not rest well with most, particularly with theologians and religious leaders. Naturally, such perspectives on humanity are not acceptable to many. What's more, behaviorism is harshly reproached for its inability to generalize behavior. True, it may predict specific actions but behaviorism does not even attempt to contemplate general behavioral patterns.

Despite its limitations, behavioral psychology is deeply embedded in mainstream psychology. Most notably, the experimental practices espoused by behaviorism are currently observed throughout the psychology field. In other words, its research procedures were recognized as objective and systematic; accordingly other schools of thought eventually adopted them. This respectable research practice undoubtedly facilitated psychology's standing as a true science.

Furthermore, behaviorist theories and practices are applicable to other disciplines, such as education. Since behavioral scientists endeavor to uncover universal principles of learning, its scope is a suitable complement to the educational realm. Take a simple educational practice: an instructor's use of a syllabus. Students are able to track the progress of learning throughout the course, generating a sense of accomplishment. Instructional technology is another example where behavioral psychology is most effective. Students are instantly reinforced through each stage of learning. This fosters continual effort and motivation as pupils experience recurrent educational success.

Similar to education, behavioral psychology is applicable to marketing. Advertising engages multiple senses, namely vision and hearing. Through television or print advertisements (such as those in magazines or newspapers), humans are taught that particular products and/or services deliver specific effects. By way of modeling, marketing professionals anticipate consumers will make an explicit connection between the illustrated result and the targeted product or service. In other words, advertising exploits a primary philosophy of behaviorism: an ability to predict and manipulate conduct. Interestingly, Watson, the pioneer of behaviorism, ended his career as an advertising consultant.

4. LITTLE ALBERT EXPERIMENT

After having outlined the main tenets of behaviorism, its methodology, strengths, weaknesses, and applications, it seems prudent to briefly discuss an experiment within the field. The well-known behaviorist experiment, dubbed 'Little Albert', involved a toddler who was conditioned to dread white rats. Initially, the child exhibited pleasure at the sight of a white rat. However, after Watson paired the appearance of the animal with a loud noise, Albert quickly became frightened of the rat. He soon reacted negatively, showing visible signs of discomfort and distress, even when the rat was offered without the accompanying startling noise. It was later determined that the child generalized his fear; that is Albert associated anything resembling a white rat (i.e., a rabbit) with painful experiences. The 'Little Albert' experiment highlights the philosophical foundations of behavioral psychology. First, its focal point was public behavior. In other words, the child's reaction to particular stimuli was the object of investigation. Albert's internal state (i.e., thoughts or feelings) was irrelevant to Watson; this is in line with behaviorism's insistence on the importance of overt conduct.

Secondly, the experiment employed a systematic procedure; such has been declared critically significant to behaviorism and its standing as a scientific discipline. The study supported behaviorists' belief that actions are affected by environmental stimuli. Finally, this research indicates the predictability of behavior. After some conditioning, Albert connected the loud noise with the appearance of the white rat; his overt responses (crying and fussing) became predictable. Certainly this classic experiment embodies behavioral psychologists' set of philosophical assumptions.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, behaviorism is an influential sub-discipline of psychology. Its emphasis on overt actions and environmental influences makes this branch of psychology unique. It has been commended for its practical perspective towards research. In addition, its adherence to the experimental method has been

lauded. On the other hand, behaviorism is harshly criticized as it disregards many aspects of humanity (i.e., consciousness and free will). Despite this, behavioral theories and practices are found in diverse fields, including education and advertising. The philosophical underpinnings of behaviorism are readily visible in a classical experiment, that of 'Little Albert'. In this investigation, one witnesses the theoretical beliefs underlying this controversial yet influential school of thought as they unfold in a concrete and enlightening experiment. Regardless of behaviorism's future, it is undeniable that it has held significant sway over psychology in the past.

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