Behaviorism

Founded by John B. Watson in the 1920s, Behaviorism is a branch of psychology that concerns itself with the observable actions of a person or animal. Behaviorists rely strictly on scientific methods. Behaviorists disregard consciousness and emotion because they are unobservable and therefore unprovable scientifically. They believe that all behavior is the result of a person’s prior conditioning — uncontrollable, external forces in the environment.

**Historical Antecedents**

**Materialism:** the theory that people can explain reality with the laws of matter and motion, without reference to mind and spirituality.

**Scientific realism & empiricism:** the use of the inductive method (examining information gained through the senses) to arrive at truth; preference for hard scientific data over the soft data of the humanities.

**Positivism:** the use of scientific observation and measurement of facts as the basis for new knowledge, rather than theology and philosophy. Logical positivists argued for precise use of language.

**Philosophical behaviorism:** the idea that behavior itself explains the causes of behavior; not consciousness.

**Voluntary and involuntary behavior and reflexology:** Descartes identified the notion of involuntary behavior which led to the concept of reflex. Exploration of reflexology revealed lawful properties of behavior, especially reflex action in animals. Pavlov explored conditioned reflexes in animals and “classical conditioning” — when a stimulus (slab of beef) is paired with another (ringing bell), the response to the beef (salivating) will eventually also be the response to the bell even when the beef isn’t around.

**Key Theorists**

**Edward Thorndike** (1874-1949) developed the theory of associative learning, or “connectionism,” the theory that repetition of stimulus and response in itself does not establish a learned connection, but satisfying responses do establish connections.

**John B. Watson** (1878-1958), building on Pavlov, argued that psychology was the study of animal and human behavior, not of the mind. His influence included bringing behaviorism into the mainstream and creating new baby care practices like rigid feeding schedules.

**B.F. Skinner** (1904-1990) advanced radical behaviorism, believing that environment controls people and that scientists can study and manipulate environmental conditions. He developed the “operant conditioning” paradigm — an animal’s behavior invokes an environmental response, and “reinforcers,” or consequences, following the response either encourage or discourage the repetition of the behavior. Skinner argued that even personality is the result of consequences of behavior.

**Roles of Instructor & Learner**

**Goal of education:** to encourage behavior that leads to survival of the species, society, and individuals. **Objective of education:** a student will exhibit specific behavior as a result of a unit of instruction.

**Role of the instructor:** to design an environment that encourages goal behaviors and discourages unwanted behaviors. The teacher engineers the necessary conditions to bring about learning behaviors, and establishes criteria to judge the behaviors that students exhibit (as successful or not).

**Role of the student:** to act on the environment in order to elicit reinforcers that either encourage or discourage the repetition of the action. A student has learned something if her or his behavior recurs (if the reinforcer encouraged the behavior) or changes (if the reinforcer discouraged the behavior).

**Approaches to Adult Education**

Teachers implementing Behaviorist principles would specify behavioral goals; sequence material in a logical progression; identify what students already know; plan the lesson to include reinforcement; and finally, evaluate, record, and adjust.

Teachers would pay special attention to the consequences of behavior and educational accomplishment, and ensure that consequences follow consistently and immediately following key behaviors. Teachers would present material in small units that would allow students to succeed in mastery, receive reinforcement, and proceed.
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1. (1866-1959) Identified latent learning, a form of learning that is not immediately expressed in an overt response.
3. (1886-1959) Developed "contiguity" theory of learning, that all learning is a consequence of association between a particular stimulus and response.
4. (1849-1936) Developed "classical conditioning" concept, that through repetition and pairing, an animal may respond to a neutral stimulus the same way it responds to a meaningful stimulus.

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5. (1884-1952) Known for Drive Reduction Theory, that when a need is satisfied, drive is reduced and the organism returns to a state of relaxation.
6. (1904-1990) Contributions include operant conditioning, use of teaching machines to better facilitate learning, the concept of punishment.
7. (1874-1949) Observed the law of effect, that consequences of the behavior are responsible for repetitions in behavior.

References & Further Reading