

Readings Tutorial 10

Behaviorism

Behaviorism was originally a movement in psychology begun by John Watson in 1913. In its original form, it was a view of, as Watson titles a section in his paper, the problems and scope of psychology. Watson felt that psychology had been constrained by the 'dominance of both traditional religion and philosophy'¹ that it had never 'been able to free itself and become a natural science.'² It appears to have been a reaction against the introspective methods that were the prevailing methods at the time.

Its major tenets were that psychology should only be about things that were directly observable and thus objective, that is, the study of stimulus-response pairs, although Watson recognised that it is almost impossible to isolate a single stimulus even in a controlled-experiment context, and so spoke of situations instead.

The purpose of this study was to be able to control behavior, to improve the lot of everyone. The behaviorists were interested in the 'special methods' that could be developed 'for rapidly and securely implanting and retaining the body and speech habits which society demands...'³

This sort of thinking does scare me a bit, as does some of the experiments described by Watson, such as the experiment in which the child is trained to fear furry animals. I'm unsure if it's the same experiment, but when studying this sort of thing in Psych here at UNSW, we were told about 'Little Albert' (at least I think that's his name), who was conditioned to fear white rabbits, I think. The amazing thing was the attitude with which this is taught. 'Of course, we can't do this sort of study because it's wrong to do this sort of thing, but the results got this way are really good!' is a concise summary of the attitude which seems to prevail.

However, some of the points made by the behaviorists were valid. In the context of scientific investigation, it is not valid to propose some inner, unobservable mechanism in order to explicate some phenomenon. To mangle Skinner's example, it is not valid to propose that something which increases the likelihood of someone drinking does this because it possesses a 'thirst-making agent' of some sort. This simply places the possibility of explanation out of reach, since the thirst-making agent is unobservable.

I must admit I find it difficult to be very objective in reporting these papers, as this is exactly the sort of attitude which caused me to leave the Psych department.

¹ Watson, J.B. 'Problems and Scope of Psychology', *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* (in the reader), pp. 1

² *ibid*, pp. 1

³ *ibid*, pp 9