

Do you sometimes agree with both the humanists and the behaviorists?

# A re-examination and resolution of the Behaviorism vs. Humanism debate for counselors

by Richard V. Peach



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The individual exposed to "humanistic" and "behavioristic" literature throughout his university schooling, whether in psychology or education, may after each successive exposure to one particular school reflect, "I agree with that." The inconsistency of finding ground for agreement in two supposedly different schools of thought concerning the nature of what is meaningful in the examination and understanding of man, eventually will, or should, create a tension that needs to be resolved.

## The debate as rival techniques

At present when the referents "behaviorism" and "humanism" come up in discussion they are usually in the form of the adjectives: "behavioristic" and "humanistic." In other words, the bulk of the literature we read is not so much concerned with the theory or philosophical bases of these two schools of thought but rather the techniques which claim to be derived from them. Our concentration is on technique. For behaviorists the discussion might center around the merits of programmed instruction, using a machine versus the use of books and teachers, or the most appropriate techniques for classroom management. In the humanist camp, particularly in the area of individual development, the discussion might center around the relative merits of the "sensitivity training" or the "encounter" approach, vs. the "T-Group" approach. These group counseling techniques are usually the method of intervention preferred by humanist counselors.

With this focus on technique the issue as to who has the most effective technology is raised. Educators and psychologists of the behavioral persuasion usually feel that they have an advantage here. Because they are content to focus on, and attempt to measure only behavior, they can offer fairly conclusive evidence for the effectiveness of their work. (eg. The client's fetishistic reaction either persisted or it didn't.) Behaviorists like to point to the dearth of convincing studies pointing to effectiveness of group growth experiences, the main tool of the humanists. Campbell and Dunnnett (1968) and Smith (1975) have published in the *Psychological Bulletin* two of the most comprehensive and rigorous reviews. To grossly paraphrase: Campbell and Dunnnett find some changes in behavior, but virtually no evidence which is satisfactory to them, regarding the effectiveness of T-group experiences on managerial personnel relative to their organizational roles; Smith reviewed studies on the outcome of sensitivity training and after culling out numerous studies which didn't obtain measures from controls, which didn't use a repeated measures design, and which didn't satisfy a minimal time duration, was able to find a group of 100 powerful studies, only seventy-eight of which detected significant predicted changes in behavior.

Behaviorists would argue that in view of this literature one has to work rather hard to find convincing evidence for the effectiveness of humanistically orientated techniques. Is this a problem to the humanist?

No! At this point the humanist returns to the definition of his field. Humanists right from the beginning had, almost in anticipation, set up a defense. This defense might be called "engulf and devour" eclecticism. The basis of this strategy is contained in any definition of humanist psychology one might like to review. Here is that provided by Cohen in Hans Eysenck's *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 1972.

"It" (humanistic psychology) "does not deny the validity of any psychological work with sound

credentials, in theory and method. It insists, however (and this is its distinctive feature), that a comprehensive psychology of man cannot be delimited by particular methods (experimental or statistical), any more than a cartographer can omit oceans or mountain ranges merely because he cannot traverse the former or scale the latter."

This definition by its breadth actually allows the inclusion of behaviorism: "... does not deny the validity of any psychological work with sound credentials." Humanists seemingly are not denying the validity of focusing on overt behavior as a basis of analysis for predicting future behavior but they are implying that there is more to human behavior than this element alone.

### The debate as philosophical differences

Where then do the differences lie, as there are in fact differences, and what led to this rather messy state of affairs? Interestingly, the fundamental distinction between behaviorism and humanism is philosophical and is revealed when one examines the problem of knowledge: (i.e. what is knowledge?).

"Empiricism" and "rationalism" are two major opposing positions in the argument concerning the relationship between experience and the organization of the mind. Hilgard and Bower (1975) makes the distinction very nicely. To paraphrase: The British Empiricists in line with the positivism of Comte developed a doctrine that knowledge was derived through sensory experience. Complex ideas were constructed of simpler ideas and these in turn could further be reduced. They believed that the mind was like a machine built out of simple components each in an additive relationship to the next. They also believed that ideas were connected through the action of association or contiguity in experience.

In contrast the European rationalists, Descartes, Leibniz and Kant argued that reason alone rather than sense data, spiritual revelation or any other source was the basis of knowledge. They also argued that certain types of knowledge were *a priori*.

Empiricism was very powerful in the history of the rebellion of psychology against philosophy. In this rebellion empirical research attempted to render obsolete any speculations about the nature of the universe. This tradition starts with Ebbinghaus and Thorndyke, in the 1880's and 90's and has continued in the 20th Century with Pavlov, Watson and Skinner. Meditations and introspections on the nature of the soul, the psyche, the mind and so on were replaced by observations and experiments concerning the behavior of living organisms, including human beings. Without this work, psychology, under the influence of such as Titchener, could have remained the asylum for philosophical meditation forever.

It is clear that the empiricist tradition gave impetus to this development. Empiricism's notions, particularly that of associationism, are fundamental to the concepts of the "law of effect", Guthrie's contiguity theory of learning and classical and operant conditioning. However, rationalism has received considerable support for the notions of *a priori* knowledge from psychologists working on perceptual development and depth perception (Hilgard and Bower, 1975, p. 8). Associationism is also an inadequate principle to use when explaining the "well-formedness" of most speech in-puts and out-puts. Associationism allows for no mechanism by which the individual can sort out a "word salad" from a meaningful sentence.

The debate as it is now presented is essentially between behaviorally orientated and cognitively and perceptually orientated psychologists who both utilize the empirical approach to knowledge embodied in the present day hypothetico-deductive model of scientific investigation. Given their differences in philosophical origin, it is understandable that professional quarrels occur as to the adequacy of their respective explanations for behavior. Humanist psychologists, however, aren't usually associated with cognitive or perception research, so having rejected the commonly implied inclusion of behaviorism by humanism and pointed to the philosophical gap between behaviorism and one of the derivatives of rationalism, cognitive psychology, where does this leave us in our examination of the differences between behaviorism and humanism?

### Humanist psychology and ideology

A closer look at the literature of humanistic psychology seems to indicate that the substantive difference is actually political.

Charles Hampden-Turner's book *Radical Man* (1970) is probably the best researched and documented presentation of the contemporary humanistic position. In *Radical Man* Hampden-Turner develops three themes: a critique of current social scientific philosophy and the research it generates, his own model of man, and the application of that model in the analysis of contemporary social settings. The empiricism and positivism which is so extrovertedly displayed by behaviorists such as Skinner, and the structural-functionalism found in the sociology of Talcott Parsons and Radcliff-Brown is seen by Hampden-Turner as essentially conservative in function. Man is examined as he is and the causes for his condition dissected. By studying man in this fashion a sanctification of the *status quo* takes place, which is only a short step from saying "this is the way it will be" or "this is the way it has to be". Thus for Hampden-Turner the image of man implicit in the practice of science is that of an atomized, depersonalized, determined man.

Hampden-Turner's work was a product of the sixties. The sixties were a well-spring for humanism and typically Hampden-Turner provides us with an alternative image of man: A man with a "synthesizing capacity which turns brain input into novel output, a man with a symbolizing and exploring capacity, and a man who engages in a model of psycho-social development such that through investment of his own "authenticity" and through risking himself he achieves higher "synergy."

Unfortunately for Hampden-Turner he uses as evidence for his model of man the effectiveness of T-Group training, an effectiveness we have already seen is somewhat doubtful. This tends to add little veracity to the model. Also, while the practice of social science investigation does often produce a rather dismal picture as humanists like Hampden-Turner point out, this is by no means a result of the epistemology on which it is based. Indeed this argument is a basic weakness of the humanist position. A behaviorally oriented social scientist can have a utopian goal for man, even if *Walden II* is not everyone's idea of utopia.

### The organism and behaviorism

We have observed that cognitive and perceptual psychology are the natural heirs to rationalism while humanist psychology is a step child as it is more of a political doctrine rather than a psychological discipline. It now

seems only fair to see if behaviorism also has feet of clay. It does. The problem is not philosophical, rather it concerns assumptions about the subject being studied.

Herrnstein (1977) argues that Skinnerian behaviorism, in its efforts to demonstrate the control of its technology over behavior, made a number of assumptions which down-played the role of the organism. An implicit assumption was that of equipotentiality, that any response and reinforcer and any conditioned stimulus and unconditioned stimulus can be associated equally well. Seligman (1970) suggests degree of "preparedness" as an alternative concept because some responses are simply more "natural" to the animal than others. For example, pigeons more readily peck for food reinforcers than peck for shock avoidance.

Skinner makes a great deal out of the notion that the taught responses of this animal are "arbitrary." They are not necessarily natural to the animal and the reinforcer is not linked directly to the response. That is, the animal might lever-press for totally different reinforcement consequences—food, drink, escape, etc. However, Skinnerian psychologists have to specify both the range of dimensions of the stimulus and the response. As it turns out, they do this in terms of "natural lines of fracture." These natural lines of fracture depend on the physical measures of the stimulus and response, the contingencies of reinforcement (how much change in stimulus will produce the response and at what point changes in the response mode will constitute a change in the response), and the characteristics of the organism itself. Commercial animal trainers Breland and Breland (1961) were among the first to point out the contamination of response classes by their reinforcers. Racoons, indulged in washing behavior with coins they had to collect for reinforcement and pigs rooted with the coins under a similar contingency. These organisms clearly have predispositions to certain behavioral routines. This challenges the notion of equipotentiality and in terms of this evidence the consideration of natural lines of fracture in a response is in itself a contradiction of the notion of arbitrariness.

Closely tied to the above argument is the Skinnerian notion of drive. For him drive might be defined as a particular class of classes of behavior. The covariation in these classes and their reinforcers makes the concept necessary even for Skinner. These drives are commonly referred to as hunger, thirst, sex, etc. and behaviorists usually assume that they are few in number. As a consequence, they are argued to have salience in a very wide range of situations. The excessive concern with these few primary drives has diverted attention from the reinforcing nature of a behavior performed without an external reinforcer. It is interesting to note that sexual gratification is in essence not the presence of the partner but the experience of internal gratification, a consequence of sexual behaviors. The reinforcer is behavior, not an object.

If a response is self-reinforcing then it can't also be arbitrary. Herrnstein (1977) urges that academic psychologist studying animal behavior must look more to ethology if they wish to have a greater understanding of behavior's intrinsic power to reinforce.

Every school pupil has been told that speech and language are what make our species unique. It is interesting that it is in this specific behavior that Skinner's operant model experiences its greatest problems of prediction and has had its plausibility come into most

doubt when compared with more traditional nativist or organism oriented views (Chomsky, 1959, Lenneburg, 1969).

### Enter the counselor

This state of affairs leaves the counselor in an exciting position. If he desires he can freely adopt the ideology of humanism and the techniques and methods of analysis derived from both cognitive personality theories and behaviorism. Indeed Lazarus (1977) argues that even among "behavior therapists" "only a few die-hards would not agree that the stimulus-response 'learning theory' basis of behavior therapy is passe and that a distinctly cognitive orientation now prevails."

The real world of human suffering has forced clinicians together at a time when theorists are prepared to acknowledge the deficiencies in their respective analyses.

Mahoney (1977) observes that in the 1960's the "insight-oriented" therapists were frustrated because they couldn't induce change and the behavior therapists were frustrated because of the restrictiveness of their theory and technology.

The new hybrid is the cognitive or social-learning trend now developing in psychotherapy. Its origins are in the thought management programs of Carnegie (1948) and Peal (1960). Later Rotter (1954), Kelly (1955) and Bandura (1961, 1973) produced academic publications. Interestingly, Ellis's (1962, 1975) rational-emotive therapy gained popular support before it achieved any professional respectability.

In therapy there are three primary objectives: 1) perceptual skills, 2) performance skills and 3) associative skills. The client is taught to examine his environment and to analyze his thoughts and emotions about it. He is also taught to evaluate his associations; that is, his expectancies and perceived contingencies, and he is taught the relationship between his cognitions and his performance and emotions. Goals are set and behaviors and outcomes noted and monitored by the therapist.

The counselor is presently freed from having to label himself, and what has been at times something of a tiresome debate has been largely resolved, leaving him free to pursue the broadest and most effective approach with his client.

### Summary

To the extent that humanist and cognitive psychologies share the same philosophical base they can be reconciled with behaviorism in social learning theory.

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## Growth of Knowledge

The growth of knowledge might be likened to an expanding balloon, with the volume of air inside the balloon representing the known and the skin of the balloon marking the boundary between the known and the unknown. As the volume of the known increases, so does the surface area of the balloon—the extent of the boundary between the known and unknown—so that the more we see, the more we see there is to see.

John Gribbin in  
**White Holes, Cosmic Gushers  
in the Universe** p. 4.  
Delacorte Press, 1977.