Study of Behavioralist theory

MEENU

Introduction

Behaviorism, as a learning theory, can be traced back to Aristotle, whose essay "Memory" focused on associations being made between events such as lightning and thunder. Other philosophers that followed Aristotle's thoughts are Hobbes (1650), Hume (1740), Brown (1820), Bain (1855) and Ebbinghause (1885) (Black, 1995). Ivan Pavlov, John B. Watson, Edward Thorndike and B.F. Skinner later developed the theory in more detail. Watson is the theorist credited with coining the term "behaviorism"[1].

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A key difference in these various forms of associationism is that until Skinner, they were considered to be associations of mental or cognitive events. Skinner departed from this mental associationism and claimed that what associates two things is the environment itself, not the mind of the spectator[2]. This departure has been noted as being part of a substantial number of changes in what was, until then, called Behaviorism - and which Skinner called Radical Behaviorism - that it may be a historical accident that it was called Behaviorism at all [3].

Behaviorism as a learning theory

Dr. Srinivasan (Sam Houston State University, Huntsville TX) actually created the original Behaviorism Learning Theory blueprints. The school of adult learning theory that adopted these principles has become known as the school of Behaviorism, which saw learning as a complex process of responses to several kinds of distinct stimuli. Skinner always referred to it as a three-term contingency comprised of a discriminative stimuli, or Sd, a response, or R, and a reinforcing stimulus, or Srein. Conditions of deprivation and satiation, and other changes in the environment, have come to be generally acknowledged as a kind of fourth term, and are denoted as Motivating Operations (MO) generally, Abolishing Operations (AO), or Establishing Operations (EO) depending on whether they make a reinforcer less effective (abolishing), more effective (establishing) and so on. Jack Michael has been instrumental in refining and exploring these elements [4]

A reinforcement is defined as a stimulus that strengthen the response, which is to say that it makes it more probable, or alters its frequency. Spillane (2002) states, "the behaviorist perspective, associated with B. F. Skinner, holds that the mind at work cannot be observed, tested, or understood; thus, behaviorists are concerned with actions (behavior) as the sites of knowing, teaching, and learning" (p. 380).

The Technology of Teaching

There have been several major Behaviorist innovations for improving learning. A few were B.F. Skinner's Programmed Instruction, Fred Keller's Personalized System of Instruction (PSI)[5], Ogden Lindsley's Precision Teaching[6], and others. Technology of teaching must go hand in hand with that of learning.First the teacher must SURVEY the content of teaching.Then,QUESTION the topic to be teached.Followed by READING the topic and RECALL them.REVIEW in subsequent lesson-chapters.

B.F. Skinner also wrote a book on major problems in popular teaching theories called The Technology of Teaching which attacked educational problems which were then current. The descriptions of educational problems, not surprisingly, seems like it was written today: truancy, vandalism, violence in the classroom and more.

One of the keys to effective teaching is discovering the best consequence to shape the behavior. Consequences can be positive or negative – rewarding or punishing. Consequences transpire after the desired behavior occurs and can involve either positive or negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement involves a stimulus that increases the likelihood of a particular response, such as a child receiving a gold star for doing a chore. Negative reinforcement also increases the probability of the desired response and involves removing an undesirable stimulus upon completion of the desired response. An example might be entering the correct password to turn off a loud alarm. Punishment is often confused with negative reinforcement; however, punishment is used to erase undesirable behaviors by presenting a distressing stimulus when the behavior occurs. Paying a fine for bouncing a check is a form of punishment. "Extinction" occurs when there is no consequence at all – for example if you knock at the door and no one answers, pretty soon you simply stop knocking (Zemke, 2002).

Verbal Behavior

The seminal work of Pavlov demonstrated that the application of neutral stimuli could be used to elicit a response from animals in the same way that an unconditioned stimulus could [7] From these initial studies other psychologists such as John Watson demonstrated that these principles could be applied to

humans (Cheetham & Chivers, 2001)[8]. Skinner invented the term operant to describe his attempt to better account for volitional behavior we usually call free [9]. In Skinner's original work it was confined solely to animals, particularly the white rat. However, it wasn't long before operant behavior was observed in humans. Skinner's attempt to account for the operant behavior of humans, including complex language functions, resulted in his seminal work, Verbal Behavior (1951) which accounted for ways in which human operants differed for non-human ones. This was extended with the conception of rule governed behavior [10]

The Illusion of Free Will

One of the assumptions of many behaviorists is that free will is illusory, and that all behavior is determined by a combination of forces. These forces comprise genetic factors as well as the environment either through association or reinforcement. The "illusion of free will" concept is deeply embroiled in the nature vs. nurture controversy. Asking the question, "Are individuals shaped by genetics or by existentialism?" is the essence of this debate. Behaviorists believe that the environment is the primary influence that determines who individuals will be and the behavior they will develop. Hence, the reason why free will is only an illusion or imaginary deduction.

Skinner argued that the assumption of lawfulness in human behavior was an unprovable prerequisite to the scientific investigation of human behavior[11]. Without the assumption of lawfulness, that is the lack of freewill, such a science could not exist.

Skinner has continued this argument by noting in his controversial book Beyond Freedom and Dignity that the historically beneficial forces that have arisen to defend Freedom and Dignity may be violently opposing the scientific conception of man.

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