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Hamlet on the Couch Revisited: A Radical Behavioral Perspective

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Shakespeare's character Hamlet has been studied from several psychological viewpoints. Psychoanalytic thought has focused on Oedipal issues and related unconscious struggles that interfere with Hamlet avenging his father's murder. Other theories hold that cognitive processes drive Hamlet's emotional difficulty and impede his taking action. The current study presents an assessment of Hamlet's dilemma from a radical behavioral perspective and identifies the independent factors impacting Hamlet's behavior. Using this framework, the apparent difficulty understanding Hamlet is also addressed.

Keywords: operant, psychoanalysis, Skinner

Much has been written about William Shakespeare's character Hamlet as a psychological case study (Bynum and Neve, 1986). Renown psychoanalysts, including Freud, have offered their perspectives on Hamlet's psychopathology. Philip Mairet (1969) referred to "Hamlet's enigmatic character" and wrote that each successive phase of psychological understanding has produced some new elucidation. At the same time, Mairet holds that these explanations have served to "deepen the mystery" and that this may be the secret to the play's "extraordinary magnetism." In 1873, Henry Maudsley (see Bynum and Neve, 1986) held that clinical theoreticians are drawn to the exercise of analyzing Hamlet due to Shakespeare's "penetrating with subtle insight the character of the individual, and the relations between him and his circumstances, discerning the order which there is amidst so much apparent disorder, and revealing the necessary mode of the evolution of the events of life" (p. 392). Considerable attention has been paid to the pivotal circumstance that occurs in the play's present, which is that Hamlet has been given the task of avenging his father's murder and taking his rightful place

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as king. Surprisingly, there is an apparent lack of careful consideration of Hamlet's history, i.e., "the necessary mode of the evolution of the events of life…" (p. 392).

The lack of attention to the history of the character is evident in the psychological postulations that have been promulgated. Psychoanalytic theorists have focused on the internal world of Hamlet, noting, for example, his Oedipal strivings. From this perspective, Hamlet struggles with killing his uncle Claudius to avenge his father's murder because Claudius serves as the embodiment of Hamlet's Oedipal urges, i.e., the repressed wishes of his childhood, to kill father and sleep with mother. Cognitive–behavioral theorists hold that cognitions cause emotions and affect our ability to influence our worldview and behavior in healthy or unhealthy patterns. For Hamlet, his thinking led him to a state of despondency and affected his ability to act (Hamlet and CBT, 2012). An example of dialog that can be seen as supporting this cognitive view:

Hamlet
Denmark's a prison.

Rosencrantz
Then is the world one.

Hamlet
A goodly one; in which there are many confines,
wards and dungeons, Denmark being one o' the worst.

Rosencrantz
We think not so, my lord.

Hamlet
Why, then, 'tis none to you; for there is nothing
either good or bad, but thinking makes it so: to me
it is a prison.

The perspective of literary Darwinism maintains that much of what we perceive as cultural is genetic, a result of species natural selection. In his analysis Carroll (2010) combines universally adaptive human traits with an evolutionary perspective on individual personality differences and differentiates the evolutionary concept of attachment from what he calls "the false ideas of Freudian psychology, and to the Oedipal theory at the very center of those ideas" (p. 237). Carroll explains Hamlet's difficulties as stemming from the "corruption in the emotional nucleus formed by the relation between mother and child" (p. 246), which he proposes is the case with young Hamlet and his mother. This corruption is causally connected to Hamlet's depression. He notes the neurobiology of

"the depressed brain" in that "the depressed brain gets stuck in stress mode. It fails to readjust" (p. 247). Carroll goes on to explain that Hamlet's emotionally pathological condition has physiological effects that impede his ability to act. "The neural circuits mediating positive emotionality — circuits engaging the nucleus accumbens and activating the dopamine reward system in the frontal cortex — shut down, producing anhedonia, and consequently a loss of motive and interest. The neural circuits mediating negative emotionality — engaging the amygdala and activating the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis — go into overtime, producing chronic anxiety and anguish" (p. 247). A radical behavioral perspective, a scientific philosophy of behavior grounded in evolutionary theory, however, would lead the investigation in a different direction, a direction that actually augments psychoanalytic thought.

Radical behaviorism is a specifically deterministic scientific philosophy (Skinner, 1945). It holds to the objective understanding of the causes of behavior and looks to environmental contingencies for these causes. Unlike methodological behaviorism, radical behaviorism includes "private events," i.e., behavior that can be observed only by the individual performing the behavior such as thinking and feeling, as being available for understanding.

From the perspective of radical behaviorism, behavior is the product of three nested processes of variation and selection by the environment. The first of these processes is phylogenetic natural selection or evolution. This level includes behavior that is often referred to as instinctive. The second of these processes is ontogenetic and consists of operant behavior. Operant conditioning accounts for behavior that is selected by features of the environment that aren't stable enough to play a significant role in genetic evolution. This category includes behavior that is learned during a lifetime such as fetching a ball, turning a page in a book, or tying a shoe. For humans, a special class of operant conditioning called cultural conditioning constitutes the third of the three nested processes that control behavior (Skinner, 1966, 1981).

Cultural behavior is learned by role-modeling and instruction, including storytelling. For non-human animals, the act of modeling behavior is instinctive, a product of biological natural selection. In humans, the act of modeling behavior is reinforced by being imitated (Skinner, 1990). The reinforcement of the role-model's behavior often leads to the role model reinforcing the behavior of the imitator. A salient example is a parent showing a child a dish of apple sauce and saying, "apple sauce." The child repeating the words reinforces the parent's behavior and results in the parent reinforcing the child's behavior by smiling, saying "yes! apple sauce!" and feeding the child the apple sauce. The parent's modeling behavior and the child's imitating behavior then generalize to other circumstances and types of behavior. This sometimes includes imitation of parental behavior that the parent wishes the child did not imitate. In addition to families, cultural conditioning occurs in contexts such as societies, communities, and small groups.

Further adding to the environment–behavioral complex is the phenomenon of respondent conditioning, also known as classical conditioning. In respondent conditioning, a neutral stimulus is paired with a stimulus that causes a reflexive response such as salivation or increased heart rate, leading to the neutral stimulus acquiring the ability to elicit a reflexive response (Rescorla, 1988). Respondent behavior, which often accompanies operant behavior, plays a key role in the experience of emotions. In the example above, the pairing of the response "apple sauce" with the parental approval and being fed the apple sauce, through respondent conditioning, causes an emotional reaction in the child. The respondent also serves to strengthen the operant behavioral repertoire, including the behaviors of speaking and imitating. Similarly, the child's behavior, in addition to being a reinforcer for the parent's operant behavior, elicits the parent's emotional reaction (Estes and Skinner, 1941).

The Mystery of Hamlet's Procrastination

The mystery of why Hamlet continually delays carrying out his mission to avenge his father's murder and take his rightful place on the throne is considered to be the main source of intrigue about the character. Additionally, Shakespeare gives little indication of what Hamlet is thinking and leaves us with several puzzles and conundrums regarding apparent inconsistencies (Cain, 2017). An ultimate explanation, which involves identifying the independent variables causing Hamlet's behavior, would allow us to better imagine what he is thinking.

So, what are the clues to elucidating the independent variables causing Hamlet's struggles? Freud saw Hamlet's difficulties as a manifestation of universal Oedipal strivings and hypothesized a special inhibition to Hamlet avenging his father's murder, namely a complex involving childhood repression of sexual affection toward his mother with accompanying jealousy of his father, the latter being concealed by a compensatory solicitude (Ruger, 1910). Although this perspective might be accurate, it describes Hamlet's struggles and yearnings but leaves us without an explanation for them. In other words, Hamlet's unresolved feelings toward mother and father may be present, but, if so, are *part of* the behavioral complex and not the cause. The Oedipus story itself provides a useful analogy regarding the causes of the events that unfold. Why did Oedipus behave the way he did? To understand this, it is important to recognize that the origin of his difficulties lies with his father Laius. Laius consults an oracle and learns that his son will kill him. In a well-known version of the story, Laius acts to avert the disastrous prophesy of Oedipus killing him and marrying his own mother by having his servant leave the infant Oedipus to die on a mountainside, setting the events of the story in motion.

In addition to the elusiveness of understanding Hamlet's difficulty, the story appeals to the reader personally relating to Shakespeare's character as many people

have experienced their own problematic behavior and struggle to understand, let alone alter this behavior. Here I focus on the clues to the causes of Hamlet's struggles, or madness, which Shakespeare makes explicit, as well as the reasons for the reader's parallel difficulty with clearly understanding the causes of Hamlet's dilemma.

Solving the Mystery: What We Know

The story of Hamlet begins with the Ghost of Hamlet's father appearing to Hamlet's friends who are on watch at the castle. We know that Hamlet's father's name is Hamlet. It is hard to imagine that Shakespeare's decision regarding the naming of his characters was arbitrary, so we should note that although many people, including Kings, name their children after themselves, Hamlet and his father sharing the same name is important.

The ghost of King Hamlet first appears dressed in full armor. This presentation can be viewed as an archetype representing parental authority, responsibility, and invulnerability. This perspective is endorsed by Hamlet's view of his father as having been perfect, as he says in Act I Scene 2:

Hamlet
He was a man. Take him for all in all.
I shall not look upon his like again.

This view is juxtaposed with the reality that King Hamlet reveals in Act I Scene 5:

Ghost
I am thy father's spirit,
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison-house

Clearly, King Hamlet was not perfect, not a man who was "all in all."

Also, in Act I, Scene 5, the Ghost reveals the truth about King Hamlet's death, that although it was declared that he was bitten by a snake while sleeping in his orchard, the truth is he was poisoned by his brother.

Ghost
I find thee apt;
And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed

That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,
Wouldst thou not stir in this. Now, Hamlet, hear:
'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,
A serpent stung me; so the whole ear of Denmark
Is by a forged process of my death
Rankly abused: but know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown.

Hamlet
O my prophetic soul! My uncle!

Ghost
Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts, —
O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power
So to seduce! — won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen:
O Hamlet, what a falling-off was there!

Solving the Mystery: What We Can Surmise

The revelation of the reality that King Hamlet was murdered by his own brother was not a complete surprise to Hamlet as he exclaims: "O my prophetic soul" meaning, essentially, that he suspected as much. With the Ghost's characterization of uncle and mother, King Hamlet most probably held these opinions of them before his death. He did not give any indication that his brother's and wife's behavior was terribly surprising or out of character.

King Hamlet, in continuing to describe his murder reveals something else about himself in Act 1, Scene 5:

Ghost
Brief let me be. Sleeping within my orchard,
My custom always of the afternoon

This is the linchpin to understanding Hamlet's struggle. King Hamlet, knowing his brother's potential for treachery, as well as brother's and wife's adulterous behavior, chooses, on a daily basis, not to act, not to attend to vital personal and national responsibilities. With these nefarious characters around, he would nap each afternoon in the orchard. His avoidance of responsibility could not have been limited to this one set of circumstances. It must have been the case that King Hamlet had

a pervasive pattern of avoiding taking decisive action. This notion is further bolstered by Hamlet's soliloquy in the same scene, following the Ghost's departure.

Hamlet
And you, my sinews, grow not instant old,
But bear me stiffly up. Remember thee!
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!
Yea, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
That youth and observation copied there;
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmixed with baser matter: Yes, by heaven!

Why would Hamlet need to wipe away so much of what he learned, including what he learned through observation in his youth, unless it would interfere with his objective of carrying out his father's wishes?

Now we are in a position to conclude that the ghost of King Hamlet assigned Hamlet a task that King Hamlet himself clearly avoided while alive — a task that was so vital it was literally a matter of his own life or death. This presents a confounding dilemma for young Hamlet, two conflicting behavioral conditions. Either Hamlet must obey father's verbal instructions and behave in a manner that is counter to the role-modeling that he experienced throughout his life: "all pressures past, That youth and observation copied there" or avoid acting and disobey the verbal instructions. This also speaks to a reality about King Hamlet — essentially, he held the position of king, yet eschewed his responsibilities. One could even surmise that this is the true reason for his time in purgatory by day and having to walk the earth by night — i.e., his deeds by day and his words by night, which is reflected in young Hamlet's dilemma.

The Behavioral Perspective and Subjective Language

The important components of the selecting environment that control behavior are the type and schedule of reinforcement, as well as the circumstances or stimuli present when the behavior is reinforced. Skinner summarized this arrangement as a three-term contingency: in the presence of a stimulus, known as a discriminative stimulus (S^D), a certain response (R) is reinforced (S^R). This is summarized as follows: $S^D \rightarrow R \rightarrow S^R$. Once behavior becomes more likely to occur in the presence of a given stimulus (S^D), we find that other stimuli become effective in making the behavior likely. For example, if the doorbell rings, we

are likely to look and see who's at the door. A person or delivery being present reinforces this behavior. If we move to a new house, we are likely to emit the same behavior even if the doorbell chime and the layout of the house are different. In addition, the topography of the behavior may change dramatically yet serve the same function. For example, someone may come to the door but, if they are injured, they may use a wheelchair.

Skinner (1953/1965, p. 132) pointed out that:

> The effectiveness of a single property of a stimulus when combined with novel properties is shown when we are uneasy in the presence of a new acquaintance because he resembles someone whom we dislike. The very subtle property responsible for the resemblance is sufficient to arouse an emotional reaction. The Freudian argument that early emotional conditioning affects later personal adjustment presupposes such a process, in which the subtle property by virtue of which an acquaintance resembles one's father or mother, for example, is said to be independently effective. The Freudian "symbol" presupposes the same process: a piece of abstract sculpture which generates an emotional response because it resembles the human body demonstrates the effectiveness of the property responsible for the resemblance. As Freud pointed out, the resemblance may be effective whether or not it is recognized by the individual.

With this understanding, behavior and emotional reactions that may seem inexplicable come into sharper focus once the person's history is taken into account. Additionally, it is important to recognize that the social environment contains a vast array of three-term contingencies. Because of the variety of these stimuli as well as the intermittent schedule of reinforcement, behavior in the social setting, once established, is highly resistant to extinction or change. Also, various properties or combinations of stimuli can influence behavior in a variety of ways. The various stimulus properties and combinations also affect respondent behavior. These conditioned reflexive or internal physiological responses (typically involving glands and smooth muscles) are an integral component of emotional states.

Behavior reinforced through the mediation of other people will differ in many ways from behavior reinforced by the mechanical environment. Social reinforcement varies from moment to moment, depending upon the condition of the reinforcing agent. Different responses may therefore achieve the same effect, and one response may achieve different effects, depending upon the occasion. As a result, social behavior is more extensive than comparable behavior in a non-social environment (Skinner, 1953/1965, p. 299). In some respects, social behavior is also more flexible, in the sense that the organism may shift the topography of behavior more readily from one situation to another when its behavior is not effective. However, like the example of answering the door, the function of the behavior remains the same with regard to the socially mediated reinforcer. Another reality is that one's own behavior is a stimulus. Thus, stereotypic patterns of behavior can themselves serve as a conditioned reinforcer. Of course, not all reinforcers

are the same for everyone. Reinforcement is defined and characterized in terms of its effect on behavior. A stimulus that is contingent on a particular behavior is a reinforcer if the effect of the occurrence of this stimulus is an increase in the frequency or likelihood of the response. This is important as a stimulus may serve as a reinforcer for one person but not for another, and this is certainly true regarding conditioned reinforcers. For example, one person may go to great lengths to obtain a baseball card while another would not. Additionally, because of the variety of socially mediated reinforcers regarding baseball cards, and thereby the conditioned reinforcing properties of the cards for some people, behavior related to obtaining such cards is difficult to extinguish.

The immediate family functions in teaching the child to walk, to talk, to play, to eat in a customary way, to dress, and so on. The family uses the primary reinforcers available to it: food, drink, and warmth, and such conditioned reinforcers as attention, approval, and affection (Skinner, 1953/1965, p. 403). The family, as well as the broader culture, conditions behaviors such as rituals, beliefs, prejudices, attitudes, and problem-solving strategies (Deguchi, 1984). Young Hamlet finds himself in a circumstance which resembles the circumstances at court i.e., treasonous and adulterous behavior by uncle and mother, and Hamlet's father not attending to these matters. Remember, Hamlet was not surprised by the revelation that his Uncle murdered his father. Should Hamlet decisively follow through with his task of avenging his father, he would be acting counter to his father's behavior. As people are likely to have consistent patterns of behavior due to the difficulty of extinguishing or altering behavior that is intermittently reinforced, especially social behavior, King Hamlet's lack of effective attention to these matters was most likely longstanding and consistent. As stated earlier, King Hamlet indicated that his brother's treachery was in character. Even young Hamlet had suspected his uncle. It then seems to be the case that King Hamlet, young Hamlet's important role model, had a longstanding pattern of avoiding difficult issues. This set the occasion for Hamlet to have a similar behavioral pattern, resistant to change.

Should Hamlet decisively follow through with his task of avenging his father, he would be acting in a way counter to powerful family norms. Even if this behavior bestows benefits it is a conditioned punisher and a loss of a conditioned reinforcer. Think of someone who has a choice of going on a trip that they've won as a prize but the timing conflicts with a religious observance. Hamlet avoiding responsibility was vicariously reinforced through his father modeling this behavior. From a behavioral perspective, Hamlet's emotional connection to his father is understood and explained as being driven by unconditioned and conditioned (Pavlovian) responses. Behaving in a manner similar to his father is the result of Hamlet's conditioning which includes the avoidance of vital interpersonal difficulties. In subjective language, Hamlet following through with avenging his father's murder and taking his rightful place as king would be experienced as

a feeling of disconnect and abandonment. In behavioral terms, the instruction that Hamlet avenge his father's murder conflicts with his cultural conditioning. Taking action would result in the loss of powerful generalized conditioned reinforcers, including his own avoidance behavior, as well as the elicitation of respondent behavior associated with conditioned aversive stimuli, conditioned by association with loss of paternal approval. Again, subjectively, Hamlet would experience a profoundly distressing loss of identity — an existential crisis (to be or not to be).

Dilemmas and Consciousness

It is assumed that Hamlet's procrastination has much to do with unconscious forces. A radical behavioral stance holds a similar perspective. Many researchers who have only a cursory understanding of behaviorism find this viewpoint puzzling. However, Skinner (1990) pointed out that consciousness is used to indicate more than awareness, that it means co-knowledge (Latin: con-science) or knowing with others. This alludes to verbal contingencies needed for "consciousness." Even more than verbalization or vocalization, consciousness points to the seemingly unique human ability to symbolically represent events over time. We can tell others (or ourselves) what happened yesterday and how that led to what is happening today, and how that might influence what will happen tomorrow. Consciousness seems to be a descriptor for this uniquely human behavior. One perspective of psychodynamic psychotherapy is that the goal is "to make the unconscious conscious." This is typically achieved through verbally addressing a person's current difficulties, including ways that these difficulties are manifest in the therapeutic relationship, and their connection to the person's history. The effect of elucidating dilemmas causes the controlling stimuli to be more salient, thus facilitating the opportunity to make choices that are more in keeping with the individual's objectives. For example, being informed by your doctor that a food that you've enjoyed throughout your life now causes a mild allergic reaction that causes you to experience discomfort a day or two later influences your choice in consuming this food. This is made possible through the individual having had a history of reinforcing experiences with verbal descriptions and instruction. If Hamlet were to better understand, i.e., articulate his dilemma, he might have a better chance of reaching a resolution rather than only speak of his resolve to avenge his father (similar to father giving him instructions) yet avoid doing so (similar to father's avoidance of his responsibility to protect himself and the realm).

Cultural Resistance to Understanding Human Behavior

Why has it been difficult for many psychologists and other theoreticians to articulate the independent variables impinging on Hamlet's behavior? What has

interfered with their understanding Hamlet's procrastination? Similar to Hamlet's dilemma that he was unable to articulate, civilized culture is faced with an unarticulated i.e., unconscious, dilemma. One side of this dilemma is enacted as we continue to adhere to the culturally syntonic notion that, unlike nonhuman animal behavior, human behavior is enigmatic in that it is not entirely lawful. This would preserve our notion that we are somehow special, and avoid challenging the perspective that humans, especially civilized humans, are more important than the rest of the biological community. We can see ways that this perspective has played out over history and placed beliefs about humans at odds with science. In 1616, the Vatican officially denounced the Copernican heliocentric system, which Galileo's observations supported. An important concern of the religious conservatives at the time was the idea of a moving Earth, which contradicted certain Biblical verses. More recently, the theory that humans evolved via the process of natural selection has also been contested, not based upon scientific examination, but on the belief that humans are special and apart from that process (Arnocky et al., 2018; Branch and Scott, 2009). The behavioral perspective is that the process of variation and environmental selection (e.g., reinforcement) applies to the development of behavior over a lifetime just as it applies to the evolutionary development of species over generations. It is not surprising that similar objections to the behavioral position have been raised.

It is a culturally held belief that, when it comes to our behavior, "we are not animals" (Baars, 2003; Harrison, 1994; Motyl et al., 2013). Many individuals maintain that we have "free will" and we are not fully subject to behavioral laws. This belief plays a major role in many of the difficulties that we face. For example, if we hold to the position that we are not bound by behavioral laws, it would stand to reason that we behave as if we are not subject to the laws of behavioral ecology, which would account for several environmental problems (Hopfenberg, 2003, 2014; Hopfenberg and Pimentel, 2001). On the other hand, if we were to fully take hold of the reality that we are part of, and not apart from, meaning the rest of the biological community, we would be better able to understand and address these vital difficulties. The reality is that we evolved on this planet as all other creatures did, and our behavior is governed by the same laws that govern the behavior of all other creatures. This gives us the opportunity to attend to many problems, including threats to human sustainability (Hopfenberg, 2009). Understanding Hamlet's difficulty as a dilemma connected to his cultural conditioning would shift our perception of his behavior from mysterious and enigmatic to clear and understandable. The loss of the mystery may represent the loss of a view of Hamlet and ourselves as being special and unknowable. However, the benefit of knowing would seem to outweigh not knowing.

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