

The History and Current Status of the Concept “Behavior”: An Introduction

Tracy B. Henley

Mississippi State University

Bring together five or six psychologists to talk about something as seemingly straightforward as behavior and you never know what will happen. What did happen, at least in the case presented here, went well beyond my expectations.

This symposium (this introduction and the following six essays, pages 341–398) began as a series of papers delivered at the Centennial Meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, August, 1992. The original idea was to have a historian trace the evolution of the term “behavior” up until around the time of Watson, to have a behaviorist discuss the concept from the perspective of behaviorism per se, to have a cognitive psychologist present the current status of “behavior,” and to have a final speaker cover clinical and/or humanistic uses and conceptions of the term. Something “close” to that was presented at APA, and what appears here is a more formalized version of those initial presentations. Before I provide more of an introduction to the symposium that follows, let me go back a bit and provide a context for the general issue of examining the term “behavior.”

To earn my keep at Mississippi State, I frequently teach research methods to undergraduates. This can sometimes be enlightening. Earnest students who know well the cliché that psychology is the study of behavior and equally well that most of the research being done by the MSU faculty involves scales and surveys (or is with computers), are sometimes vexed by distinctions I want them to learn between behavioral observations and ethological methods, scale construction and validation, and phenomenological interviews and content analysis. Occasionally this leads to comic (or sad) statements on exams or research proposals that would make Skinner or Merleau-Ponty roll over in their graves.

The problem, as often as not, stems from a conceptual confusion about "behavior." Sometimes, as in "behavioral observations," the term carries a rather precise and technical sense. At other times behavior is used in a broad and casual sense to refer merely to "action," while in the introductory textbook phrase "psychology is the study of behavior," it falls somewhere between those two extremes. By and large, it is not the case that the students are unable or unwilling to follow these shifts in meaning; they just don't see the reasoning that leads to a given shift. I think it is a lack of understanding about how the term was used historically — before, during, and after the heyday of behaviorism in America — that accounts for this. The rules for shifting the meaning of the term "behavior" are to be found in the history of psychology, not in research methods. Methodologically sophisticated graduate students and colleagues sometimes use the term "behavior" in curious, perhaps even inconsistent ways too.

A few years back, Steve Hibbard and I began to discuss this situation. Our discussions led to both the APA symposium and to our own "theory" about the current status of the concept "behavior" (Hibbard and Henley, in press). Hibbard highlights some of our thinking in his paper here (Hibbard, 1993), so I will not. The APA symposium was to be a public exploration of both the history and present status of the concept of "behavior" from as diverse and balanced a group as we could find. Had others noticed something curious about the concept of behavior? And, to the degree that they had, how did they explain it? Finding people who understood the phenomenon and were willing to talk about it was easy. Thomas Leahey would provide us with the history and etymology of behavior up through about 1920. J.E.R. Staddon would trace the evolution of the concept from Watson, through Skinner, into modern behavioral research. James Jenkins would cover the cognitive revolution and cognitive psychology's use of the term. Joseph Rychlak would provide a consideration of the term from a clinical psychology perspective. And, Steve Hibbard would respond to, and synthesize, these ideas with our own.

Two unexpected things happened, however. At the last minute, Staddon was forced to withdraw. How could you do a symposium on behavior without a behaviorist? As it turned out, my sleepless nights before the convention were an overreaction. Leahey went a little farther forward, and Jenkins a little farther back, and no glaring gap emerged. Moreover, none of the speakers particularly had an ax to grind with behaviorism. So, there was no obvious point where a "behaviorist" was needed to defend against any misconceptions about behaviorism.

The second unexpected thing was much more positive. As the papers were delivered a clear organizing theme emerged, and one that was somewhat different from what I expected the focus of the symposium would be. I suppose

"future evolution" is the best term to capture this theme — the future evolution of "behavior." To the extent that Leahey and Jenkins spoke historically, an evolutionary theme was perhaps to be expected. But from Rychlak, through Hibbard, on through the interactions between the speakers (presented in an expanded form here), speculations about the future evolution of the term held center stage. What unfolds before you then is a fine collection of historical scholarship, contemporary commentary, and futuristic speculation about the concept of behavior in psychology.

References

- Hibbard, S. (1993). Behavior, adaptation, and intentionality: Comments on Rychlak, Leahey, and Jenkins. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 14, 373–384.
- Hibbard, S., and Henley, T. (in press). Is psychology really "The Study of Behavior?": A conceptual analysis of "Behavior" and some recommendations on the use of "Behavior" in psychology. *Theory and Psychology*.