

A History of Behavior

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The paper traces the development of the term behavior from its first appearance in the English language to the nineteenth century, showing that its primary meaning was always morally tinged. In late nineteenth century America, however, conceptions of morality shifted from being defined by transcendental rules to being defined by deviations from statistical norms. At the same time, the focus of psychology shifted from the study of consciousness to what organisms do, and psychologists redefined their field as the study of behavior, the term having been drained of all moral significance, ready for use by value-neutral science.

“Perhaps the greatest problem which any historian has to tackle is neither the cataclysm of revolution nor the decay of empire but the process by which ideas become social attitudes.”

J.H. Plumb

This symposium is about an idea — the idea of behavior. As I have argued elsewhere (Leahey, 1992) the ideas of psychology both shape and reflect the social attitudes of the modern world. I wish to set the stage for what follows by briefly undertaking the task defined by Plumb. The term behavior existed before institutional psychology, and its meanings reflected the social attitudes of pre-psychological, pre-modern culture. Social attitudes were shifting in the nineteenth century from traditionalist to modernist, especially in the decades witnessing the birth of psychology. In its formative years, psychology was shaped by — indeed was a vehicle for — the new modernist attitudes. The idea that modern psychology adopted as its object of study, and which both reflected and furthered the spread and deepening of modernist social attitudes

was that of behavior. But like social attitudes, the idea of behavior had to be changed to meet the needs of modernist, naturalistic, scientific psychology.

Behavior as a Category of Psychology

In 1910, James Rowland Angell (1911) participated in a symposium on "Philosophical and Psychological Usages of the Terms Mind, Consciousness, and Soul." These terms lay at the heart of the traditional philosophical, mentalistic psychology that the new psychology of consciousness sought to continue on a scientific basis. Holding such a symposium, however, discloses psychologists' uncertainty about the scientific status of their undertaking. Certainly they had cause to be anxious. Yerkes (1910) had recently surveyed American biologists about their attitudes toward psychology, and found that they held it in low esteem; indeed, Yerkes concluded that "few, if any sciences, are in worse plight than psychology" (p. 121). Central to psychology's plight was uncertainty about its subject matter. In his annual report on "Progress in Psychology" for the *Psychological Bulletin*, E.F. Buchner in 1910 cited Yerkes study and wrote that "some of us are still struggling at initial clearness as to what psychology is about" (1911, p. 1).

The key issue was whether scientific psychology could proceed as a continuation of philosophical psychology. Angell addressed this question in his contribution to the symposium. The concept of a spiritual soul had been abandoned with the founding of psychology as a science committed to naturalism, and redefining its subject matter as consciousness, extending, with experimental control, philosophers' introspective psychology. However, Angell noted, the concept of mind was in "a highly precarious position," and consciousness was "likewise in danger of extinction" (p. 47). In his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) — American psychology's founding document — William James had warned against reifying mind and directed psychological study to the evanescent flowing of conscious experience. In 1905 James had asked rhetorically, "Does consciousness exist?" and provided his reply in the negative. By 1912, at another symposium, Angell's tentative verdicts of 1910 on the fate of mind and consciousness had hardened: mind was gone and consciousness was a "victim marked for slaughter" (Angell, 1913, p. 255).

No wonder, then, that psychologists had become unclear about the definition of their field: If psychology was not about any of its traditional objects — soul, mind, or consciousness — what could it be about? At the end of his 1910 presentation, Angell identified a new candidate for psychology's subject matter:

There is unquestionably a movement on foot in which interest is centered in the results of conscious process, rather than in the processes themselves. This is peculiarly true in animal psychology; it is only less true in human psychology. In these cases interest is in what may for lack of a better term be called "behavior;" and the analysis

of consciousness is primarily justified by the light it throws on behavior, rather than vice-versa . . . [Should this movement succeed, psychology will become] a general science of behavior. (Angell, 1911, p. 47)

I have always been struck by Angell's difficulty finding a word to define the object of the new movement. Angell was perplexed by something we take for granted — the definition of psychology as the science of behavior study. Nevertheless, Angell clearly accepted his new formulation for psychology. Despite warning that introspection not be abandoned altogether, and expressing anxiety lest psychology be swallowed by biology, in 1912 Angell said that the behavioral movement would be "substantial and enduring" (Angell, 1913, p. 268). And, of course, his student Watson published the behaviorists' manifesto the next year (Watson, 1913).

One reason for the rise of behavior as a category of psychology was internal to the field, the need of comparative psychologists for a term to designate anything an organism did. Angell touches on this when he says the movement is "peculiarly true of animal psychology" (Angell, 1911, p. 47). Before Darwin, psychology tended to concern itself only with humans, uniquely capable of introspection and perhaps uniquely conscious. Once Darwin erased the line between human and animal, the definition of psychology as the introspective study of consciousness was undermined. Animals can only be observed from without, and in *Origin of Species* Darwin uses the terms *behave* and *behavior* in morally empty ways. As psychology was influenced by the study of animals (and children and the insane), it was drawn to the study of what they do, and thus came to focus on behavior rather than mind.

But as Angell said, the movement was also going on in human psychology. The change from concern with soul, mind, and consciousness to something new involved more than a the kind of adjustment that occurs to a term when it becomes part of a science's technical vocabulary. As a psychologist living at the turn of the century, Angell was part of larger social transformations, and the coming of behavioral psychology was caused by them as well as by the needs of animal psychologists. Angell fastened on a word that only approximated what he meant, but which was already changing in socially significant ways, and was becoming ready to suit psychologists' needs.

The Prehistory of Behavior

Etymology

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the term *behave* appears in the fifteenth century, formed by a combination of the verb *have* with the Middle English prefix *be-* (Skeat, 1879–1882). The sense of *have* in *behave* had to do with a person's bearing, and in its original uses *behave* was a "dig-

nified expression, applied to the bearing, deportment, and public conduct of persons of distinction." In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the term was used especially to describe how soldiers acquitted themselves in battle. The first attested occurrence of *behave* is in a book published about 1440: "To lerne to behave hur among men." Even today, the OED notes, when used without qualification, *behave* means "To conduct oneself well, or (in modern use) with propriety," although this is chiefly said of children, who might misbehave. When she was a toddler, my daughter Elizabeth would exhort pets, other children (or herself) to "be HAVABLE!"

The term *behavior* formed later. Its first attested use is in a book published by the great printer/publisher Caxton in 1490: "For hys honneste behauoure [he] began to be taken with his love." Lexicographers find the suffix curious, even "abnormal" (Skeat, 1879–1882), *behavior* being formed by a confused combination of *behave* and the Tudor English *havour*, derived from the French *avoir*, which referred not only to possessions — what one *had* — but to ability as well. The OED defines its unqualified use as "good manners; elegant deportment." Thus, *behavior* was a term of moral evaluation, not a term of neutral description.

Representative Usage

Let me list a few instances in which *behave* or *behavior* occur, to show its moral dimension and its changing connotations. These excerpts are arranged chronologically.

The *Magna Carta* (1215): After describing the baron's rebellion and promising to redress their grievances, King John is made to write that the barons then "shall behave to us as they did before." Clearly this means they will be on good, not rebellious, terms.

Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night* (1602) [III, iv, l. 202]: "The behauiour of the young Gentleman, giues him out to be of good capacity, and breeding."

The King James Bible (1611), *Psalms* 101:2: "I will behave myself wisely in a perfect way." *Corinthians* I, 13:5: Charity "[d]oth not behave itself unseemly."

Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), in the opening of Chapter XI, "Of the difference of manners": "By manners I mean not here decency of behavior, as how one man should salute another, or how a man should wash his mouth, or pick his teeth before company, and such other points of small morals; but those qualities of mankind that concern their living together in peace and unity."

In his *Dictionary* (1755) Samuel Johnson defined *behavior* as "External appearance with respect to grace."

Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811): beaux [boyfriends] can be "vastly agreeable, provided they dress smart and behave civil."

Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience* (1849), the basic question: "How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today?"

From its inception to the mid nineteenth century, *behave* and *behavior* were terms with a moral dimension. The moral meaning had passed from denotation to connotation, but it was still there. To be used by a naturalistic science, the moral aspects of the term *behavior* had to be erased completely. Changes in social attitudes were making this possible.

From Traditional to Modern: Changing Social Attitudes

From Morals to Norms

In discussing American social history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Boorstin (1974) observes that the rejection of aristocratic class distinctions and the concomitant building of a democratic society required a reconceiving of standards of conduct. In place of external ideals set from above, came the concept of the norm established by statistical averages and deviations from average. Boorstin documents the change from ideals to norms in many areas. An interesting one concerns the fabrication of machinery. European machines of the nineteenth century were masterpieces of the craftsperson's art, finely decorated, with each part made to the highest attainable standards. American machines, by contrast, tended to be plain, with only the most functionally important components precisely made. Europeans looked down on American machines as inferior, but Boorstin argues that the standard of quality was being reworked by American manufacturers. American machines, in contrast to European machines, were made no better than they needed to be. Statistical quality control replaced the ideal of perfection with the idea of tolerances — degrees of imperfection that could be tolerated because functionally unnecessary or too expensive to improve. Statistics was similarly applied to clothing sizes, insurance risks, commercial transactions, and incomes. In all cases, the standard of comparison of machines and people shifted from abstract ideals of perfection to empirically derived means and standard deviations describing the world as it was, not as it ought to be.

Psychology, Boorstin argues, brought the concept of statistical behavior norms to human conduct. Using tests and questionnaires, psychologists set out to determine what people are, not what they ought to be, and in so doing revamped American's concepts of moral conduct. Boorstin traces the change from traditional moral ideals to evaluation by statistical norms to the child study movement led by psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall and Arnold Gesell. Hall used questionnaires to chart the course of psychological devel-

opment through scientifically — that is, non-morally — defined stages. As a result, Hall did not look at children, as parents were wont to, as imperfect adults, but as autonomous beings going through phases of development. Thus children should not be held to adult standards of morality, but to stage-appropriate norms. For example, Hall regarded lying in young children not as a despicable trait to be snuffed out, but as an expression of children's "mythopoeic" faculty, which was undervalued by parents, and which was related to harmless, even healthy, play.

By studying the development of many children, Gesell established norms of development that parents could use to evaluate their own child's progress. The new scientifically collected, statistical norms replaced moral ideals in guiding parents' childrearing. Gesell wrote

[Age norms] are useful in determining whether a child's behavior is near ordinary expectations, but also whether the behavior is well-balanced in the four major fields (motor, adaptive, language, and personal-social). It is especially important that there be no deviations in the field of personal-social behavior. (cited by Boorstin, 1974, p. 236)

In their advice concerning children, then, psychologists had completed the movement from evaluating conduct by comparison to external moral ideals imposed from outside and above (in this case, traditionally by the parents) to evaluation by comparison to behavior norms derived from study of peers. The change was felt by Americans. For example, in 1912, the *Saturday Evening Post* complained that American colleges were encouraging "that most un-American thing called class and culture . . . There should be no such thing as a superior mind" (cited by Leahey, 1992, p. 276). The change from aristocratic ideals to democratic norms was visible, and applied to adults as well as children.

From Character to Personality

The years from 1880 to 1920 — the decades during which American psychology began — are regarded by historians as marking the greatest social transition in U.S. history. America went from being an isolated collection of rural, agricultural communities to being an industrial nation-state playing a powerful role on the world stage. It was in these years that a new dimension was added to the process of democratization described by Boorstin. In addition to becoming a more thoroughly democratic society, America was becoming a mass consumer society. Americans were aware of this change, and sought ways to manage their adjustment to it, turning to science in general and psychology in particular to do so.

Rieff (1966) has argued that changes in social structures cause changes in the modal type of person appropriate to different forms of life. In support of Rieff's argument, Susman (1984) has shown that in the period after 1880, as America became a mass society the modal type of person shifted from being described by *character* to being described by *personality*. The term character was central to the self-understanding of nineteenth-century Americans. The American public philosopher of the antebellum years, Emerson, defined character as "Moral order through the medium of individual nature" (cited by Susman, p. 274). Character and behavior were both terms of moral approbation in which the individual accepted and displayed an external moral order. Character was, Susman argues, the "modal type felt to be essential for the maintenance of the social order," and American culture was "a culture of character" (p. 273). Character suited a society of productive, self-controlled, relatively isolated individuals.

However, after 1880 America became an urban, mass, consumption-oriented society, and a new modal type of person was needed, a type Rieff (1979) calls *psychological man*, and Susman identifies as *personality*. Susman documents the change by a study of self-help books published in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Psychologists today are, I suspect, apt to think that self-help books are of recent origin. In fact, the first self-help book (its title was *Self-Help*) was published in England in 1844 and was a best-seller. The emergence of self-help books may be regarded as a sign of the process of democratization described by Boorstin. Susman shows that in psychological self-help books of the nineteenth century the focus was on achieving character. After 1900, however, the focus shifted to achieving personality, "the quality of being Somebody," as Laurent's *Personality: How to Build It* (1915) put it (cited by Susman, p. 277). In a mass society, the problem was standing out from the crowd. As Laurent said, character was either good or bad; personality was famous or infamous.

Instead of cultivating morality, one was taught to cultivate self-expression, to be oneself. Ironically, being oneself often entailed altering oneself. B.C. Bean's *Power of Personality* (1920) taught that one should stand out from the crowd: "express your individuality." However, at the same time it urged its readers to "eliminate the little personal whims, habits, traits that make people dislike you" (cited by Susman, p. 278). As a result, self-help manuals came to lay stress on one's performance in public — one's behavior. In the changes Susman found in self-help manuals we can detect the same shift Boorstin describes from transcendental external standards to behavior norms. In the culture of character, one's deportment expressed extra-personal morality; in the culture of personality, one measured oneself against one's peers, against behavior norms. One wanted to stand out, but not too many standard deviations from the mean.

We can connect the new ideology of the self-help manuals to what I regard as the most historically significant of all APA Presidential Addresses, John Dewey's "Psychology and Social Practice" (Dewey, 1900), delivered in 1899, in the midst of America's great social transformation. Although in 1899 Dewey was a little known philosopher and psychologist, he would soon become the great public philosopher of the Progressive Era, the leading theorist of democracy and the bearing of science on society. Dewey clearly articulated the change Americans felt overcoming them. Dewey recognized that the rural, agrarian, aristocratic, society of the past was gone forever, to be replaced by urban, industrialized mass democracy. Traditional, habitual rules of conduct, suited to the nearly changeless societies of the past, no longer suited the ever-changing flux of modern life. Where tradition had enforced morality in the past, modern life questioned tradition, and looked to science for guidance in adjusting to modern life. Psychology arose as a science, Dewey said, precisely because tradition was no longer an adequate guide to behavior. Scientific psychology — the science of behavior adjustment — could show how to adapt to a changing world. Thus psychology was given the opportunity to be a major force in shaping future society, and psychologists were exhorted by Dewey to make their science useful in solving the problems of the twentieth century.

In traditional society, only aristocrats stood out from the crowd — had personality. Psychology, Dewey said, could change that, because psychology offers "the only alternative to an arbitrary and class view of society, to an aristocratic view" (p. 122). In the democratic world of the future, everyone could and should have personality — the very goal of the new self-help manuals. Progressives worried, to quote Ezra Pound, about the "survival of personality" (cited by Susman, p. 281) in the modern world. Dewey offered the studies of psychological science as a way to "save personality in all" by understanding its mechanism and learning how to give it to all people. Science, above all psychology, Dewey said, should apply itself to the problems of life, to "increasing control in the ethical sphere," in order to "enable human effort to expend itself sanely, rationally, and with assurance" (p. 124).

For Progressives, then, cultivating personality was more than an opportunity. Progressive Randolph Bourne wrote that nothing was so important as having a "most glowing personality." Self-cultivation "becomes almost a duty if one wants to be effective towards the great end (the regeneration of the social order). And not only personality, but prestige" (cited by Susman, p. 281). The change from character to personality reflected the change from external moral ideals to empirically based behavior norms, making psychology vital for schemes of Progressive social control.

Angell's "movement on foot" is, we see now, part of a larger constellation of changes in American psychology and American society around the turn of

the century. Just as the morally approbative term *character* was giving way to the morally neutral term *personality*, so the term *behavior* was changing in meaning from "conduct oneself well" to the movement of organisms from ants to *anthropos*.

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