

Intentionality and Epistemological Commitment: A Comment on Hibbard

James J. Jenkins

University of South Florida

Hibbard (1993) is surely correct in pointing to the central role of intentionality in current psychology. However, in this commentary I wish to emphasize the independent role of the common epistemological commitment of psychologists and its importance in changing the nature of our field. As experimental scientists psychologists are bound, prior to all other commitments, to respect data, especially data secured in their own laboratories. Thus, one of the most powerful instruments for changing the nature and domain of psychological theories is an experiment that can be reliably repeated in any experimentalist's laboratory.

I think that Stephen Hibbard (1993) has performed a real service in pointing out the central role of intentionality in many areas of current psychology and emphasizing its importance in altering the mechanistic philosophy of psychology. The current view is surely more subjective in attempting to address and embrace the beliefs, purposes, and intentions of the organism involved. In some sense, the problems that modern psychology permitted itself to address drove it toward this stance. I think this elucidation of the impact of subject matter is both insightful and helpful in understanding the current field. In this comment, however, I want to direct my remarks to the role played by "methodological behaviorism," which otherwise might be here neglected.

First, I agree with Hibbard that the label that we apply to "the commitment to an empirical base" is not in itself scientifically important. I have chosen "epistemological behaviorism" or "methodological behaviorism" because these terms recognize the historical roots of the emphasis on empiri-

cal grounding that was so important in separating scientific psychology from philosophy. These terms also speak reassurance to researchers in both the old and the new traditions who are concerned that the "anything goes" aspect of current cognitive psychology covers up circular reasoning, sloppy definitions, weak argumentation and loose logic. But aside from the social-political role of the terms we choose, I want to emphasize the importance and the centrality of this orientation to modern psychology because to the experimentalist (as opposed to the theorist or the philosopher) it is just that commitment that pushes (or drags) the field along.

As Hibbard points out, there were many kinds of Behaviorism and many prescriptions of varying degrees of centrality that accompanied the behaviorist program as outlined by any particular theorist. Watson's radical environmentalism was one such belief. While environmentalism is in no way essential to what I see as the core of Behaviorism, it became a part of the *Behaviorist movement* under his persuasive endorsement and the Zeitgeist of the 1920s. The faith that there was a single set of learning principles that applied to all species could also be regarded as peripheral to the core of Behaviorism, although in this case I believe that most of us would agree that it was more central to psychological theory than was the environmentalism. Obviously, there were a variety of loosely connected assumptions, beliefs, prescriptions, and injunctions that historically belonged to the Behaviorist movement in psychology and it is not a simple matter to decide which of these was critical to Behaviorism's core.

Hibbard (1993) chooses two aspects of Behaviorism as central: the laws of learning and the insistence that psychology be an empirically grounded discipline. He points out that the insistence on empirical grounding led to a (pre-mature?) restriction of subject matter and procedures, thus excluding mental variables and denying any special status to intuition and introspection. However, Hibbard asserts that first priority was given to the mechanical functions (i.e., following the laws or principles) and that such emphasis eventually led to the extension of the meaning of "behave" and "behavior" to include private (non-observable) events so long as they could be viewed as being accounted for by the laws or principles. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* can be viewed as such an example. Skinner ventured into the realm of language by concocting "a plausible account of verbal behavior" in terms of the language of the animal laboratory. It is notable that the account was hypothetical; there were no data of any kind in the book. The attempt seems to be a verification of Hibbard's thesis concerning content: language was an acceptable subject matter for behavioristic psychology only in so far as it was conceived of as obeying the rules; otherwise it was forbidden territory.

I would argue, however, that the emphasis on empirical grounding was the heart of Behaviorism and that the insistence on mechanical principles and

the restriction of subject matter were both consequences of the behaviorists' mistaken belief as to what that empirical commitment entailed. Although I am neither an historian nor a philosopher of science, it appears to me that the behaviorists, in their zeal for scientific rigor, embraced an inappropriate model of science, namely, Newtonian mechanics. To be sure, the behaviorists inherited the biological and evolutionary tradition of the Functionalists and from those traditions they gave a central place to the importance of adaptation (as Hibbard points out) but, following the physics model, they concentrated on functional laws relating the changes in one set of observable variables to the changes in another set of observable variables. The development of structural theories (as in chemistry or biology) or developmental or historical theories (as in cosmology or evolution) were not given comparable emphasis (see Meehl, 1986).

In the long run, however, the commitment to empirical grounding played an important role in the destruction of the behaviorists' mechanical view of the psychological enterprise. (For one psychologist's experience of this sort, see Jenkins, 1974.) If one is committed to respect experimental facts, then one is potentially open to change as evidence builds up new sets of "facts." In many years of pursuing problems and arguing with colleagues I have become convinced that the most effective argument is a set of powerful experiments that one can transport from one laboratory to another. If one can persuade one's experimental colleagues to repeat the experiments with their own hands in their own laboratories, real changes in opinion are likely to result. (Of course, the colleagues will believe that they have discovered the new view for themselves; do not expect to be congratulated on your contribution to the process.)

The Kentucky conference on "Verbal Behavior and General Behavior Theory" in 1964 was designed as a rapprochement between aspects of psychology that were seen as drifting apart (see Dixon and Horton, 1968). Instead of a rational reconciliation of positions, however, it furnished a dramatic instance of a clash of views (dare I say paradigms?) which seemed irreconcilable. Even usually friendly antagonists were outraged at the positions taken by their colleagues. Some participants were so disturbed that they withdrew their papers from publication in the conference proceedings. But in the long run as the experimental data kept coming in, all but the most intransigent participants began to move toward the new (cognitive) positions.

Of course the *Zeitgeist* is important and we must not underestimate "the power of an idea whose time has come," but for true conversion of an experimentalist, there is nothing like conducting an experiment that has an unlikely outcome under the older view. (For another example see J.J. Gibson's account of his personal replication of a classic Gestalt experiment, Gibson, 1967.)

References

- Dixon, T.R., and Horton, D.L. (Eds.). (1968). *Verbal behavior and general behavior theory*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Gibson, J.J. (1967). James J. Gibson. In E.G. Boring and G. Lindzey (Eds.), *A history of psychology in autobiography* (Volume 5, pp. 125-143). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Hibbard, S. (1993). Behavior, adaptation, and intentionality: Comments on Rychlak, Leahey, and Jenkins. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 14, 373-384.
- Jenkins, J.J. (1974). Remember that old theory of memory? Well, forget it! *American Psychologist*, 29, 785-795.
- Meehl, P.E. (1986). Psychology: Does our heterogeneous subject matter have any unity? *Minnesota Psychologist*, Summer, 3-9.