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# On the Social Legacy of B.F. Skinner

## Rhetoric of Change, Philosophy of Adjustment

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**ABSTRACT.** The legacy of B.F. Skinner for social improvement is examined. A significant discrepancy is noticed between the rhetoric of change contained in his writings and the underlying philosophy of adjustment to the social order. Promises to modify the environment to advance human welfare were reverted into practices of changing individuals to promote the effective functioning of the social system. A critique of Skinner's theory of values reveals that it is unable to provide a conceptual framework for the 'good' society. It is argued that even though radical behaviorism is frequently used to maintain undesirable social institutions, it could be employed to foster beneficial macrosocial changes. This contrast is analyzed in terms of (a) a discrepancy between theory and practice; (b) a preoccupation with technology over ethical decision-making; and (c) a neglect of power issues in institutional and societal settings.

The influential work of B.F. Skinner has shaped our culture and institutions probably more than that of any other contemporary psychologist. Behavior analysis principles are applied in a myriad of settings. Its impact is felt in virtually every human endeavor where behavior modification is desired, including schools, industries, hospitals, government agencies, therapy, parenting courses, and the like.

Given the controversial character of Skinner's propositions regarding human nature (e.g. Skinner, 1972), it should come as no surprise that much confusion and misinterpretation surround his writings (Hughes, 1991). The purpose of this article is not to review the extent and utility of behavior analysis methods; rather, to clarify, from a conceptual point of view, Skinner's legacy for social betterment. In the context of examining Skinner's legacy for social improvement I will not limit myself to his contributions but will also incorporate the views of his followers, generally referred to as radical behaviorists.

Skinner wrote extensively on social and political issues. He advanced very concrete notions as to how to improve society (Skinner, 1948, 1953). As will be pointed out later, however, his potential contributions to

macrosocial change have been almost completely undermined by an underlying conservative social philosophy, and overshadowed by an occupational preoccupation with microsocial settings. Seminal ideas concerning the possible reform of government and educational systems have been atrophied by a narrow interest in practical molecular technologies designed to maintain, not challenge, the organizational status quo. While eager practitioners devoted endless energies to modify behavior  $x$  or  $y$  and its proximal contingencies, they paid negligible attention to distal, yet powerful, societal structures that may have occasioned, or at the very least perpetuated, the behavior under scrutiny (Prilleltensky, 1992). Fortunately, recently there has been an attempt to bring back to radical behaviorism the *social context* (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1987; Lamal, 1989; Malagodi, 1986; Nietzel & Himelein, 1987; Task Force on Public Policy, 1988). The resurgence of interest in molar environments holds the promise that radical behaviorism may in fact contribute to create a better society.

An examination of Skinner's views reveals an inherent contradiction between a rhetoric of social change and a philosophy of adjustment. I would argue that if one is to critically assess the social legacy of B.F. Skinner, serious attention must be paid to this problematic tension. While a superficial reading of his writings would undoubtedly categorize him as a social reformer, an analysis of the same in light of his implicit functionalist views would lead one to conclude that adjustment to society, not social change, was of paramount importance for Skinner (Cosgrove, 1982).

The article is divided into two main sections. The first section is a discussion of the contradiction between the rhetoric of change and the philosophy of adjustment. The second section examines the potential of radical behaviorism for social improvement and why this potential has not been fulfilled hitherto.

### **The Idea of Social Betterment**

The legacy of Skinner for social betterment is far from clear. Contending opinions characterize his social heritage as either highly progressive (Comunidad Los Horcones, 1989; Ulman, 1991), or strongly conservative (Geiser, 1976; Nahem, 1981). I suggest that, when viewed in the context of his underlying philosophy of adjustment, Skinner's exhortations for social improvement are rendered incapable of producing meaningful social changes. I will examine this argument in more detail now.

In order to understand Skinner's philosophy of adjustment it is necessary to explore his position on values in general and social values in particular. What are the values according to which society should be constructed, or changed? For Skinner, values can be derived from naturalistic observations (B. Schwartz, 1986). Essentially, he contends that an 'ought' statement can

be derived from an 'is' statement; an error philosophers refer to as the naturalistic fallacy (cf. Mills, 1982; Steininger, 1983).

Skinner believed that science possesses the necessary tools to answer moral questions. 'If a scientific analysis can tell us how to change behavior, can it tell us what changes to make?' (Skinner, 1972, p. 97). In understanding Skinner's position, as Day pointed out, 'the important thing to realize is that Skinner's answer to this question is essentially yes' (1977, p. 12). Being able to account for the values held by individuals, however, is not the same as knowing which values are intrinsically advantageous for the promotion of human welfare (cf. Eacker, 1975; Steininger, 1983). As Freedman put it: 'the statements of the "values or goals sought" cannot come from science, even though behavioral scientists may be able to explain why an individual holds one set of values rather than another' (1972, p. 6). Robinson (1985) referred to this mistake as the externalization of scientific values. If scientific knowledge does not confer any privilege whatsoever in the selection of values to be held or goals to be pursued, then radical behaviorists cannot claim authority on the choice of values based on technological expertise (Freedman, 1972). Rogers put it well:

In the same sense that nuclear physicists shouldn't determine the conditions under which an atomic bomb should be used, or doctors shouldn't determine whether patients have a right to live or die, behaviorists shouldn't determine the desired type of behavior to be sought from people in a society. . . . Behaviorism has much to offer, both as a science and as a technique for attaining a variety of goals. It has no more to offer than any other group when it comes to deciding what those goals should be. (1977, pp. 361–362).

In a recent book Barry Schwartz argued essentially the same. Behavior therapists can 'provide a set of techniques that will help people create a good society. But they decidedly cannot indicate what a good society should be' (1986, pp. 218–219).

The 'is' upon which values should be based is positive reinforcement. Actions and situations are 'good' if they are maintained through positive reinforcement (Mills, 1982; Skinner, 1972). Hence, his appeal to the value of survival (Skinner, 1978). Reproduction, not transformation, is the value implicitly invoked by Skinner. For Skinner, a culture is 'good' insofar as it *reproduces* itself. The changes proposed are only to make society run more efficiently, not to transform it. 'The behavior we call ethical makes a group function more effectively' (Skinner, 1978, p. 93). Inasmuch as this society appears to 'survive', because it is not extinct yet, whatever will prolong this pattern of social interaction is to be regarded as desirable. Cosgrove captured this Skinnerian tenet well.

Looking at Skinner's view that value is that which is reinforcing and aids the survival of man [sic], we can conclude that he believes that whatever is,

is good and ought to exist. If a single behavior or an entire culture exists, then it must contain a reinforcing values system and is therefore good. If it is reinforcing it must be good. (1982, p. 87)

In other words, what is good is based on what exists, and since whatever exists exists because it has been positively reinforced, positive reinforcement of what exists is good.

Skinner's position on social values, then, may be summarized as follows: Since good is essentially equated with the survival of the present state of social affairs, whatever positively reinforces it is desirable. Consequently, contributions to the reproduction of the status quo are regarded as valuable.

The argument could be made, in Skinner's defense, that survival is in fact a highly desirable goal (O'Donohue, Hanley, & Krasner, 1984). This may hold if the only alternative was destruction of the human race. But excluding this possibility, survival may, and does, take many different forms. Currently 'surviving' societies may be classified as more or less democratic, more or less just, more or less tolerant, etc. Given that many kinds of cultures survive, how is Skinner to decide which one is the best? If they all survive, they are, according to the Skinnerian point of view, equally good. This dead-end is occasioned by the lack of external criteria as to what constitutes a good society, other than the singular value of cultural survival (cf. Bethlehem, 1987; Machan, 1974).

The question should now be posed: how does one reconcile, if at all possible, this social philosophy which upholds the status quo with Skinner's calls for social reform? It would appear, in light of the preceding discussions and Skinner's declaration that 'the behavior we call ethical makes a group function more effectively' (1978, p. 93), that his exhortations for social change are circumscribed to making *this* society run more efficiently. Fundamental issues pertaining to the morality of a culture, such as distributive justice and power inequalities, are omitted from his social vision and not targeted for change.

Having excluded the possibility of social transformation from the main agenda of radical behaviorism, the remaining way to improve society is by adjusting the individual to the existing social arrangements, a task for which psychologists are traditionally well suited (Napoli, 1981). The second section of this paper shows that, in effect, this is primarily what behaviorism promoted, the changing of individuals to fit the environment.

The argument presented so far claims that the conceptual framework of radical behaviorism does not provide a satisfactory account of the criteria according to which the 'good' society should be shaped. The Skinnerian philosophy allows only for the reproduction of the existing social system. But if the social vision is rejected, can we still make use of scientific behavioral principles in trying to create a better society, one firmly grounded in social moral philosophy?

In my opinion it is worth investigating the potential uses of radical behaviorism for the advancement of the good society. Evidence concerning the inability of the present social system to meet the criteria for the good society abounds (Olson, 1978). Lack of distributive justice (Facione, Scherer, & Attig, 1978; Miller, 1978), unequal distribution of material prosperity (Edwards, Reich, & Weisskopf, 1986; Weisband, 1989) and social tensions (Brittan & Maynard, 1984) are a few among the many powerful arguments made in favor of radical social transformations. This evidence informed my social values with respect to the need for social change. The explicit value endorsed here, as far as behaviorism is concerned, is that if its principles can be utilized to foster human welfare for the population at large, then such use is to be commended and promoted. For the purposes of this discussion I examine elements of radical behaviorism and their potential contribution toward the task of changing societal structures.

### **The Potential for Social Betterment**

Even though Skinner's social *philosophy* was found to be inadequate, there is merit in exploring how his *techniques* might be used to change detrimental environmental conditions, and what might frustrate these attempts. This discussion is organized around three themes: (a) the gap between theory and practice; (b) the preoccupation with technology, sometimes at the expense of ethical inquiry into the social repercussions of behavior modification; and (c) the adjustments needed for radical behaviorism to fulfill its potential for macrosocial change.

#### *Social Betterment Undermined: Gaps between Theory and Practice*

Probably more forcefully than any other modern psychological theory, radical behaviorism has upheld the tenet that human behavior is determined by contingencies contained in the environment (Day, 1987; Lee, 1988; Michael, 1984; Skinner, 1953, 1972, 1974). Needless to say, Skinner's conceptions reached beyond the psychological laboratory. His vision entailed the utilization of behavior analysis to solve social problems (Skinner, 1985). Malagodi states the radical behaviorist position with respect to social issues as follows: 'social problems originate in social environments, not in the minds of individuals, and solutions to them can be forthcoming only by radically changing environmental contingencies' (1986, p. 4).

If suffering individuals are to be helped by radical behaviorism, then experimental analyses of social circumstances conducive to human suffering are to be undertaken (Holland, 1978). These analyses are in contrast to

futile exercises of blaming-the-victim where attempts are made to change the person and not the environment (Kvale, 1985). Unfortunately, the blaming-the-victim practice has dominated the behavioral field. Behaviorists have been mostly concerned with changing, not environments, 'but the inner nature of individuals' (Holland, 1977, p. 203). Having reviewed the literature on this very point Stolz concluded:

In the practice of behavior modification, . . . society has controlled the definition of deviance, located the problem within the individual, and directed treatment toward changing the individual. Rebellious school children are taught to follow rules; questions are seldom raised about whether the classroom activities are boring or aversive. Alcoholic persons are punished for drinking or trained to make social responses considered more adaptive; questions are seldom raised about many pressures for the consumption of alcohol, such as cocktail parties, attractive advertising, and interpersonal activities for which drinking alcohol is an essential entrance behavior. Homosexuals are shocked in the presence of photographs of males or given organismic retraining; questions are only recently being raised about the societal pressures forcing homosexuals to request redirection of their sexual interests. (1978, pp. 48-49)

More recently, these shortcomings were unequivocally expressed by the Task Force on Behavior Analysis and Public Policy: 'Despite calls for system change at both community and societal level, too few behavior-analytic interventions go beyond implementation with individuals or small groups' (Fawcett et al., 1988, p. 19).

The primary use of behavior modification principles has been in highly circumscribed settings, where the main target of change is usually an individual's behavior (Burchard, 1987; Malagodi, 1986). Change is focused at the molecular level, with an attempt to alter only the most proximal contingencies, leaving structural arrangements intact. Questions regarding the operational integrity and morality of the system as a whole are seldom posed. As a result, behavioral interventions often facilitate the maintenance of inadequate social structures, inimical to the welfare of the population directly or indirectly affected by them (Krasner, 1976).

As most interventions are almost exclusively directed at the micro-level, the very institutions where behavior modification is mostly used are rarely challenged to reflect on their policies and procedures. These simply conduct a small-scale restructuring of their contingencies. This has been the case in mental hospitals, penitentiaries and schools. The school system, where behavior modification has had a tremendous impact, provides an illustrative example. More often than not, interventions are designed to neutralize rebellious children, pacify trouble-makers and simply make them more docile (Geiser, 1976; Winett & Winkler, 1972). This kind of behavioral engineering is very appealing to those reluctant to take another look at their educational practices (Sarason, 1990). Embarrassing

questions dealing with the structure of the educational system as a whole may be strategically avoided when those who do not follow the rules can be given behavioral treatment. As Geiser pointed out, 'a great danger of behavior mod technology is its tendency to reinforce the status quo and to discourage the uncomfortable questions' (1976, p. 92). On the particular issue of behavior modification in the schools Geiser observed:

Because the methods do work to a degree, behavior mod has strengthened the reign of law and order in poor school systems. . . . Behavior moders . . . are hired by those in power in institutional settings, and their methods serve the status quo of the establishment. . . . Their extremely narrow focus concentrates on a subject's behavior in an immediate situation. . . . [They] redesign the child to fit the existing environment. (1976, p. 97)

The missed opportunity for social betterment dealt with in this section derives from Skinner's philosophy of adjustment and from the eagerness of practitioners to fix relatively easy and small problems. Both of these forces steered behaviorism away from complex social predicaments into a therapeutic microcosm.

This rather conspicuous discrepancy between theory and practice has not gone unnoticed in behavioral circles. Calls to regain the 'lost' social context in behavioral applications are appearing in the literature with increased frequency, and in the most *behavioral* kind of publications (Baer et al., 1987; Jason & Glenwick, 1984; Kvale, 1985; Malagodi, 1986; Task Force on Public Policy, 1988). If their plea is answered favorably, behaviorists may face a harder, yet more rewarding, challenge.

### *Social Betterment Misguided: A Good Technique Is Not Enough*

Radical behaviorism has been absorbed by, as well as contributed to, the mechanical spirit of our century. This movement has promoted the view that the betterment of society depends mainly on the progress of technology in general, and of a technology of human behavior in particular (Woolfolk & Richardson, 1984). Developing a sound methodology to shape behavior has been of paramount importance to Skinner and his followers. In many areas, they have been more successful than others in modifying almost intractable habits (Nietzel, Bernstein, & Milich, 1991; Wilson & O'Leary, 1980). The praise received for their accomplishments in the technological field, however, may have blurred their vision with regards to the broader implications of technological successes. Oppenheimer issued a powerful warning in this respect. Commenting on the development of the hydrogen bomb he stated: 'When you see something that's technologically sweet you go ahead and do it and argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success' (quoted in Marcatillo & Nevin, 1986, p. 63).

The eagerness to control human behavior and change it should not



precede, or come at the expense of, questioning the moral implications of change for the individuals immediately affected and for society as a whole (cf. Emerson & McGill, 1989; Pitt, 1987). A rare and high standard of 'technological restraint' was set by Krasner (1976) and his colleagues when they decided to terminate a token economy system in a mental hospital because it was serving to maintain a particular undesirable social institution.

Indeed, the *first* commitment of behaviorism should be to moral reasoning directed at improving the lot of the unfortunate. Its *second* concern should be the design of methods to attain the ethically dictated goal. Traditionally, behaviorism has shown a preference for constructing technologies first and adopting ethical safeguards for their applications later (Malagodi, 1986). I am suggesting that we reverse the order; technology should be subservient to ethical decision-making. Once a social issue is selected as a target of action, behavioral technologies can be developed to address the task at hand. Unlike the amoral kind promoted by Skinner, the new version of behaviorism endorsed here is explicitly prescribed by ethical thinking. Guided by a philosophy of social justice (Facione et al., 1978; Miller, 1978; Olson, 1978), behaviorism may even be a beneficial political tool for change. The coalition of social activists with behavior analysts 'may produce effective means for using behavior change techniques to combat abuses of power, whether political, economic or social; helping disenfranchised groups gain access to resources; and assisting communities to realize their potential for change and improvement' (Fawcett et al., 1988, p. 19).

### *Social Betterment Possibilities: Seizing Power—The Missing Variable in Behaviorism*

Conspicuous for its absence in behavior analysis is an examination of power, unquestionably a prime reinforcer. Unless the distribution of power in an institution or in society in general is brought under close scrutiny, innovative reforms are bound to prove only minimally, if at all, helpful. Sarason (1990) has provided ample evidence for this assumption in the case of educational reform. Prilleltensky (1990d) and Wells (1987) noted how the lack of redistribution of power in industries impedes meaningful changes. Several other authors have shown how avoiding the issue of power results in the best fortification of the societal status quo (Edwards et al., 1986; Gross, 1980; Ryan, 1981; M. Schwartz, 1987).

From a conceptual point of view, it is highly surprising that power has not been brought under consideration in behavioral interventions more often than it has; for power allows its possessor/s to treat people equitably, fairly or unjustly. Further, it allows granting or withholding privileges. This is an expression of the contradiction between calls for social change and the

underlying conservative philosophy detailed in the first section of this paper. Behavior analysts have endorsed a piecemeal approach to the eradication of system-wide predicaments; an approach that does not threaten existing power structures.

An experimental analysis of behavior, however, can be employed in discerning the mechanisms involved in the perpetuation of systemic inequities and exploitation, and in designing a more just distribution of resources in society.

If the people of a society are unhappy, if they are poor, if they are deprived, then it is the contingencies embodied in institutions, in the economic system, and in the government which must change. It takes changed contingencies to change behavior. If social equality is a goal, then all the institutional forms that maintain stratification must be replaced with forms that assure equality of power and equality of status. If exploitation is to cease, institutional forms that assure cooperation must be developed. (Holland, 1978, p. 170)

The progressive seeds of radical behaviorism may come quicker to fruition if its practitioners consent to give to the distribution of power more than cursory attention. Lest the wrong impression be created, I should hasten to point out that the same criticism applies to most branches of applied psychology where the issue of power is all but too often neglected (Halleck, 1971; Jacoby, 1975; Nahem, 1981; Prilleltensky, 1989, 1990a, 1990c; Sullivan, 1984).

## Conclusion

B.F. Skinner purported to have a vision for a new society. However, 'the outstanding feature of Skinner's "new" society', Nahem writes, 'is that it is the same system of capitalism' (1981, p. 48). As I have attempted to show throughout this paper, Skinner's social philosophy—or lack of one—amounts to a justification of the prevailing social order. Changes are designed to perfect it, not transform it. Consequently, behavioral principles continue to be used primarily to reinforce the status quo, a status quo that radical behaviorism is conceptually unable to challenge. This conservative stance permeated the application of behavioral principles to the point that promises to change the environment to advance human welfare were reverted into practices of changing the individual to advance the welfare of the social order. As will be recalled, the values of efficiency and survival—not social justice—were of paramount importance for Skinner.

In the absence of an overarching social philosophy, the question was posed whether any socially progressive use could be made of principles of behavior modification. Although this is theoretically a possibility, when all

that behavior therapists are trying to change is a person's behavior and only the immediate surroundings, much of the potential use of Skinner's ideas for social change remains just that—ideas. In light of the excessively narrow focus on behaviors and insufficient focus on environments, we may speculate that the contribution of radical behaviorism to society would have been more meaningful had it centered more on *environmental* than on *behavioral* analysis.

Skinner's legacy for society is a story of unfulfilled promises. This is not because Skinner shied away from the social arena, but rather because he and his followers could not resolve the contradiction inherent in trying to reproduce this society and radically change it at the same time. They ultimately became preoccupied with modifying single organisms and microsocial settings. Related to this intrinsic shortcoming are the neglect of power issues and the notion that science may resolve moral dilemmas.

Nevertheless, in this era of renewed belief in intrapsychic psychologies and cognitive therapies (Prilleltensky, 1990b; Sampson, 1981), radical behaviorism is still a useful and potentially corrective measure to remind ourselves that to know a person's behavior is to know the person's physical, social and affective environment. I would argue that the progressive potential for social change contained in radical behaviorism need not be remembered by historians as a missed opportunity. Based on the documented need for social change, and guided by ethical principles congruent with the establishment of the 'good' society, behavioral technologies may serve justifiable values. Hitherto, this has not been the case.

A behavioral and environmental examination of social arrangements conducive to inequitable distribution of resources/reinforcers may be a first step in employing Skinnerian principles for the enhancement of human welfare. The allocation of resources/reinforcers according to principles of distributive justice may follow. The tools for the task are readily available. Will the experts pick them up?

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