

# BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

## B. F. SKINNER

Skinner showed early promise as a lucid writer and powerful thinker, qualities which have made him the premier representative of the behaviorist school in America today. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1951 under Edwin G. Boring, with a doctoral dissertation that concerned reflex and its behavioristic orientation. He migrated to the University of Minnesota, then to Indiana, and finally back again to Harvard in 1948, where he is still teaching and writing. His *Walden Two* and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* have become classics in a far wider field than that of behaviorist psychology.

### The Radical Behaviorist

Skinner describes himself as a radical behaviorist, as opposed to earlier behaviorists such as John B. Watson, whom Skinner claims was too extreme in his position that no distinction whatever existed between animal and human psychology. Skinner's own radical behaviorism assumes that behavior is the only legitimate concern of psychology. Behavior can be seen, predicted, and measured — and is open, therefore, to empirical, scientific investigation. Indeed, Skinner would like to see psychology become as empirical and systematic as the "hard" sciences such as physics.

Radical behaviorism does not deny the existence of internal states. These inner states can have some value, Skinner admits, and no account of human behavior would be complete without studying introspection. He believes, though, that what can be seen by introspection is not consciousness or mind but rather the person's body. And he does not think that feelings or other objects of

introspection are causes of behavior.

To find the causes of behavior, Skinner looks to the environment that immediately precedes the behavior in question. The environment is extremely important in determining behavior, for before behavior can be changed, the environment itself must alter. In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, published in 1973, Skinner maintains that we will have to change the cultural environment before we are able to change the human behavior that results from it, and that this is the only solution for such problems as overpopulation and pollution. He proposes using a *technology of behavior* in order to change behavior on a massive scale. We have sufficient knowledge to change our culture in this way, but people are unwilling to use it. Indeed, Skinner himself is often attacked as promoting tyranny and Big Brother tactics. A reading of *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* will show otherwise.

### Operant Conditioning

An important part of Skinner's theory of human learning and behavior is *operant conditioning*. According to him, there are certain things such as food, sexual contact, and so on, which contribute essentially to our survival. When we are successful in seeking out these things, the behavior which brought this about is "reinforced." That behavior, consequently, is made stronger. When our behavior successfully reduces an undesirable condition, that behavior also is reinforced and strengthened. These principles are used extensively in behavior modification therapy to induce new, more desirable behavior and to extinguish undesirable behavior.



## Behavior Modification Therapy

Behavior modification therapy bases its methodology on the belief that neurosis results from learning unadaptive behavior through normal learning processes. The goal of this form of therapy is to help the client "unlearn" his problem-producing responses to internal and external stimuli. A characteristic which sets this apart from many other forms of therapy is its reliance on scientific methods to examine the therapeutic results.

In treatment, emphasis is placed on dealing with the symptomatic behavior as it presently exists in current situations, rather than exploring earlier causes for it. Although causes are not extensively dealt with, behavioral therapy is rooted in determinism, the belief that all behavior is determined by prior experiences. Behavior is a set of responses to stimulation, and all responses are learned. The work of the therapist is based on the application of techniques from learning theory. These methods are aimed at reversing unadaptive learning and providing new, adaptive learning experiences. The task of the therapist is to discover which specific responses are maladaptive and under what circumstances they occur.

There are several preparatory steps in this process. First, it is necessary to establish a good working relationship between therapist and client that is founded on trust and a commitment to certain behavioral goals for the client. Once rapport is established, history-taking begins. The therapist then attempts to provide the client with as much understanding as possible about the nature of the behavior, the forces instrumental in producing it, and the unadaptive learning processes at work.

Treatment may take several different

forms, including the following: (1) *Systematic desensitization*, reducing anxiety through techniques of relaxation, then approaching the anxiety or fear-provoking stimuli in gradual steps. (2) *Assertion training*, one of the most successful and widely used behavioristic techniques. It is based on the assumption that each individual has the right to voice his feelings. Attention is paid to specific details, and the client keeps an account of the exact conditions under which he feels fearful of expressing his feelings. The specific situations are then worked on, often in the form of role playing. (3) *Flooding*, a method in which fear-provoking stimuli are presented in imagination or in real life, with the therapist attempting to maintain the client's anxiety until he reaches a point where he is able to respond to the stimuli in a nonanxious way — usually within 20 to 40 minutes. (4) *Aversive techniques*, such as electric shock. This is undoubtedly the most unfavorably popularized method, with the result that behavior therapy is sometimes identified exclusively with it. In actuality, aversive techniques are seldom used.

## Emphasis on Therapy Form

To a very large degree, then, behavior therapy makes greater use of the scientific model than other types of therapy. Although it does include preliminary history-taking, the discovery of the reasons for destructive behavior is definitely secondary to the step-by-step tackling of the behavior itself through programmed techniques. In this sense, emphasis is put on the therapy form itself rather than on the client-therapist relationship. Through the discovery of better and better techniques, it is believed that a successful therapy outcome is increasingly assured.