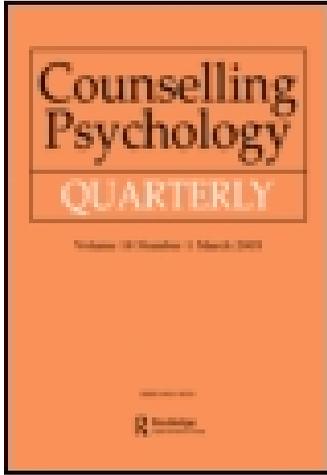


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Skinner, Skinnerism, and the Skinnerian in Psychology

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INTERNATIONAL PEER COMMENTARY

Skinner, Skinnerism, and the Skinnerian in Psychology

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There is no doubt that B. F. Skinner has made a genuine contribution to experimental psychology. He has introduced a simple but useful methodology for studying the behaviour of rats and pigeons, has developed some theoretical concepts (although he must be rather shy about using the term 'theoretical' in this context), and he has written extensively on what he conceives might be the social consequences of his discoveries. He has also, on the other hand, done great disservice to psychology by starting another school, the inevitable consequence being that psychology, already badly fragmented, has become fragmented even more by the polarity (pro-Skinner and anti-Skinner) introduced by his rather curious methods of argumentation.

Schools, of course, have always been the bane of psychology, and anathema to those, like the present writer, who wished to see the advent of a unified, scientific psychology. To have advocates of Skinnerian behaviourism, Freudian psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology and many other schools touting for customers is not an edifying spectacle, and not one which is likely to have the effect Skinner himself seems to desire. The positive things which schools have to contribute are often acceptable, but it is the negative attitude to everything that does not fit in with their conception which is so destructive.

It is now well known, and admitted by practically all experts in the educational field, that IQ is very predictive of school success and of life success, and that it is very largely determined by genetic factors (Snyderman & Rothman, 1987). This, one would imagine, would be a very important part of psychology, one having both theoretical and practical implications of enormous significance. Yet as far as one can see Skinner would excise such data. Benton & Roberts (1988) have shown that very significant increases can be obtained in the IQ of school children by supplementation in the diet of certain vitamins and minerals, particularly calcium. This finding, too, is of enormous importance, yet it would find no place in the shibboleths of Skinnerian scholasticism.

Or am I wrong in supposing such themes to be exorcised by the master? In the public debate between Skinner and myself at the annual general meeting of the

American Psychological Association in Montreal, I had planned to criticise him on the grounds that genetic factors, personality, and individual differences generally were excluded from his scheme. He rather took the wind out of my sails by stating explicitly that individual differences, personality, intelligence and their genetic factors were all of very great importance. If this is true, why are they missing from his books, and why does he thunder against those who work in these fields? It is difficult to obtain any reasonable kind of view of what Skinner really is on about when he so blatantly contradicts his own writings in public. Perhaps he is inhibited by being head of a school, the members of which would certainly not dream of talking about themes which are anathema to them, such as those mentioned.

But adherents will say, has Skinner not advanced our powers of social action immeasurably by the application of his theories, such as for instance the token economy? There are two problems with such an argument. In the first place, token economies seem to work well as long as they are being implemented, but they do not seem to have very much effect on future conduct when the contingencies no longer apply. In the second place, the token economy has a long and interesting history which tends to be overlooked by Skinner and his followers. In my book *Psychology is About People* (Eysenck, 1972) I tell the long and important story of Maconochie of Norfolk Island, who was probably the first to have used a token economy with prisoners on a very large scale. The method was extremely successful when he introduced it in 1840 in one of the most cruel and soul-destroying of all the convict settlements in Australia. His method of 'marks' might have been taken almost verbatim from Skinner's workbook, but of course it preceded Skinner by a century!

Fundamentally, what really is there in Skinner's general approach other than Thorndike's 'Law of Effect', and the general principle of the carrot and the stick? It can be said that he has quantified methods of studying the carrot and the stick, or rather the carrot and taking away the carrot, because for reasons that have never been clear to me, he believes that the stick has no effect, in spite of all the very strong evidence that it does. This quantification, however, is restricted to single individuals, and hence has no general validity. Furthermore, it involves a gigantic tautology—when we ask what is in fact reinforcing, and how do we know that it is, the only answer is that whatever in fact reinforces is reinforcing! When we leave the tautology and look for other criteria, we find that there is little generality apart from the most obvious reinforcers, such as food for the hungry rat, water for the thirsty pigeon, etc. But such generalisations are of little use for humans, particularly in the typical Western world situation where neither hunger nor thirst are very relevant to our choice of alternatives.

What I most dislike in his approach is the failure to realise that there are no real boundaries between psychology, on the one hand, and biological sciences like physiology, neurology, genetics, etc. on the other. Man is a biosocial organism, and to reject the biological features of human conduct, and relegate them to a 'black box' when all sorts of advances have been made in the biological sciences which open up the black box and give us tremendous new insights, seems to me old-fashioned and somewhat absurd. It is a willful refusal to look at aspects of reality which to a large extent can determine human behaviour. No doubt reinforcement is one of the

factors that determine behaviour, but this is intimately tied in with genetic factors, individual differences, personality, intelligence and many other variables which in turn are partly determined by, and significantly related to physiological and neurological causes. A narrow scholastic approach will never unify psychology; we must be a broad church, seeking our evidence wherever we can find it.

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