B.F. Skinner Literature Review

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In Beyond Freedom and Dignity B.F. Skinner uses his research and theories to argue for behavior modification, while also refuting the idea of free will (Skinner, 1971). Skinner begins by saying that society has progressed in the fields of technical skill and technical problem solving, but that we as a society are pre-scientific when it comes to behavior. Skinner argues that in order to understand behavior we should no longer think of it in the moral planes of freedom and dignity, but instead as complex stimulus response. Freedom, according to Skinner, is a false notion. Humans do not act according to freedom, we act according to the structure of reinforcements. These positive and negative reinforcements condition us (humans) to increase or decrease the likelihood of behavior. Skinner states the ideas of free will and dignity hinder advances in the use of behavior modification, thus we are preventing ourselves from reaching a utopian society. He concludes Beyond freedom and dignity with a strong belief that humans are a threat to ourselves, and that the method of designing behavior is a must for our culture to continue. The theories that Skinner presents in this book are the same that are present in his work of fiction, Walden Two.

B.F. Skinner published Walden Two in 1948, before he had published research on his ideas of applied behavioral analysis (Skinner, 1976). Walden Two is a utopian novel in which the characters reject the idea of free will or that humans have a soul. The main characters in the book visit a utopian community, called Walden Two, in which "behavioral engineering" is begun with each community member from birth. Walden Two is premised on the theory that human behavior is formed by environmental variables and positive or negative reinforcement. The ideas presented in Walden Two tie into Skinner’s later work, Beyond freedom and dignity, in which he claims a utopian society could be formed through careful and precise behavior modification.
Science and human behavior is B.F. Skinner’s detailed study of human behavior. Using observational science and behavior experimentation, this laid the groundwork for the rest of B.F Skinner’s studies and works. Skinner’s studies were focused on how behavior could be altered and controlled through the use of operant-conditioning (Skinner, 1953). Skinner identified three types of operants that may follow a behavior: Neutral operants, responses that neither decrease nor increase the probability of a behavior being repeated. Reinforcers are responses that increase the probability of a behavior being repeated. These reinforcers may be either positive or negative reinforcement. Punishers, these are responses that decrease the probability of a behavior being repeated. Throughout Science and human behavior Skinner uses these three operants to show how behavior modification works in various environments.

Verbal Behavior has become to be known as B.F Skinner’s most important work. In Verbal Behavior B.F Skinner applies his theories of behavior to the complex theory of linguistics and states that language is learned behavior under the functional control of environmental contingencies (Skinner, 1976). Skinner summarizes this idea at the beginning of the book, "What happens when a man speaks or responds to speech is clearly a question about human behavior and hence a question to be answered with the concepts and techniques of psychology as an experimental science of behavior" (Skinner, 1957, p. 5). The same principals of behavior are applied to verbal behavior, only they are expounded upon with further operants such as Mand, Tact, Echoic, and Intraverbal. These verbal operants are either motivations or stimuli that are followed with a verbal response and a verbal reinforcement. Unlike typical linguists and psycholinguists who primarily focus on the listener, Skinner focuses most of the book on the speaker. He does however believe that the listener is an essential part of verbal behavior. The
listener, as part of the occasion where verbal behavior is reinforced, has power over the controlling strength of the behavior.

B.F Skinner's theories of operant-conditioning with positive and negative reinforcement have had a lasting legacy on the research of human infant behavior and development (Gewirtz, Pelaez-Nogueras). Skinner’s analysis of behavior and his theory of the three-term contingency (antecedent stimulus, behavior, consequent stimulus) has given rise to much of the research in developmental-learning. The three-term contingency, also referred to as the ABC's of behavior, describes how the environment and following consequences affect future human behavior. According to the three-term contingency, a behavior lies between the antecedent, the environmental condition or stimulus changes that exist or occur prior to the behavior of interest, and the consequence, a stimulus change that follows the behavior of interest. Researchers of infant learning and development have used these principals of human behavior to form, "infant psychological development as entailing progressive interactions between the behavior of the infant and the discriminative and contingent events produced by its environment."

While Skinner’s theories are used heavily among studies of infant and child development, we also see Skinner’s impact in areas such as media effectiveness. The field of television research was impacted when researchers applied Skinner’s theories of operant-conditioning to the study of commercial effectiveness (Nathan, Wallace). Previously, television commercials were evaluated in two ways: recall measures and preference measures. These were typically measured by questionnaires and interviews of television watchers. By utilizing Skinner’s investigations into operant choice situations, researchers began to measure commercial effectiveness through "reinforcement value." Reinforcement value was the measured rate at which subjects would perform work in order to look at and listen to commercials. Using
Skinner’s theory of operant-conditioning altered the research of advertising into a far more exact science; it created a capacity in which advertisers can tailor video advertisements based on maximum preference and effectiveness.

B.F. Skinner’s theories of operant-conditioning, positive and negative reinforcement, and stimulus and behavior contingencies, have been applied to endless areas of study. These studies range from the possibility and or lack of free will, behavior modification, linguistics, infant psychology, and even technology and media studies. Without us realizing it, B.F. Skinner affects us all in many areas of our life.
References


