A BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS OF AND BY
THE BEHAVIOR ANALYST
A Review of Skinner's *The Shaping of a Behaviorist*¹

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Skinner's *The Shaping of a Behaviorist*, the second volume of a projected four-volume autobiography, covers the period from Skinner's entrance into Harvard University for graduate study in the fall of 1928, through September 1947, when he again returns to Cambridge, this time as Professor of Psychology. The 20-year period covered in this volume was seminal in Skinner's career and in American psychology. This volume is a literal gold mine for those interested in specific aspects of Skinner's career, such as the origins of operant and verbal behavior research, interactions with colleagues and students, views on psychological theory, and contact with major figures in psychology, literature, philosophy, and other fields. The major elements of this volume are the details of Skinner's personal life and the history of behaviorism during this 20-year period. The careful and meticulous detail with which Skinner presents both his personal and professional life should be highly reinforcing to systematic journal keeping by behavioral scientists.

An appreciation of what Skinner attempted to accomplish in this volume comes from his 1979 paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association entitled "On Writing an Autobiography." Skinner deliberately, and successfully, developed an autobiographical approach which, in effect, involves the application of behavioral analysis to his own life. The major principles of this approach, as Skinner himself verbalized, are: "You don't

interpret what happens, and that is that"; "Tell what I did and not what I thought or didn't think or what I felt." These are, of course, difficult principles for a human being or even a Skinnerian to follow in writing about one's life. It is important for the reader to understand and appreciate these goals. Otherwise, there is the temptation to cry out in frustration, as some reviewers have, that Skinner displays no emotion in the volume or that he does not put his material into perspective.

In his APA talk Skinner candidly admitted that his major goal in writing the autobiography was "to make people like me." This felicitous phrase emphasizes the power of attention as a reinforcer of behavior, the role of modeling in the influence process, and the complexity of language viewed as "verbal behavior."

How does Skinner go about making people "like" him? First of all, he makes use of specific techniques in creating the book itself. For example, the 350 pages of the book are uninterrupted by the usual compartmentalizing into chapters, thus enhancing the notion of a flow in time. No index is included, thus one cannot just dip in here and there. This is just as well as the book was designed to be read continuously from beginning to end and, thusly, should be. As a result of such writing techniques, Skinner conveys a sense of living and sharing of his life, the major elements and the trivialities, as he moves through his professional and personal life with his readers. In this volume a very creative psychologist describes in detail every step of the process, including possible influences on his own behavior

¹Skinner, B. F. *The shaping of a behaviorist*. New York: Knopf, 1979.

and, to some extent, his influence on others. Thus, a powerful cumulative effect is achieved as the reader becomes a participant-observer in the day-to-day life cycle of the writer. It is hard to dislike someone traveling through life with you *like* you.

Skinner's desire to make people like him brings us to what may be the central focus of the book, the nature of the influence process. What were the influences that affected the behavior of this individual whose research and writings were to become so influential on the behavior of others? Skinner pointed out in his talk that if you read about the events and influences in an individual's life then "you have taken up a bit of that person and incorporated it into your life." "To some extent you are like the person you read." The history of psychology in the second half of the 20th century to a large extent is the story of how psychologists become *like* Skinner.

In his lecture notes analyzing his own behavior as a lecturer, Skinner describes the influence process at work when the lecturer attempts to get his audience "to behave verbally as I behave . . . But have I told you the truth? How can I tell? A science of verbal behavior makes no provision for truth or certainty. We cannot be certain of the truth of that" (p. 336). Skinner further argues that he does not write "to state the truths but to have an effect upon my reader," a view which he offers as identical with Wittgenstein's observation that "I am in a sense making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another" (p. 336).

One of the most interesting and revealing documents in the book is Skinner's plan for his scientific career. It was a 30-year plan to cover the period from 1930 through 1960. For lovers of "to do" lists, this is perhaps the ultimate in that the plan foreshadowed succinctly the major developments in Skinner's career. It is rare to be able to view the process of scientific creation in such step-by-step detail.

The complexity of the influence process, particularly insofar as a major scientific contribu-

tor is concerned, is repeatedly illustrated throughout the book. Skinner describes contacts with teachers, friends, peers, students, family, and some of the major influencers of his time in psychology and society, such as Russell, Bridgman, Gertrude Stein, Whitehead, Agee, Crozier, Boring, Kantor, Kohler, Tolman, and Thorndike. Exposure to such a wide range of ideas indicates that the social influence process was continually at work on Skinner (as with everyone else) in particularly stimulating environments which, to a very large extent, Skinner himself continually designed and redesigned.

Skinner repeatedly offers the self-observation that "I never learned how to read the 'literature' in psychology, and the literature remained largely unread by me" (p. 34). There are many interpretations that can be given to this observation including the obvious, that he was unhampered in his "thinking" by the standard "knowledge" of his day. At first, such a comment made by the individual who is frequently rated as the most influential *psychologist* of the century would seem unusual and paradoxical. Yet it may well help us understand the nature of the "revolution" in psychological paradigms which has been engendered by the influence of B. F. Skinner and the community of scientists/scholars/practitioners with whom he has been interacting.

Skinner is clear and unequivocal in his own self-identification and the influence on his early positions. "I was a *behaviorist*, and for me behaviorism was a psychology. I had been converted to the behavioristic position by Bertrand Russell" (p. 10). Skinner was impressed with Russell's handling of the epistemological issues raised by behaviorism and candidly notes that he stopped reading Russell before the part where Russell attempts to disprove behaviorism. Skinner viewed behaviorism and epistemology as being closely related—"Behaviorism was a theory of knowledge, and knowing and thinking were forms of behavior" (p. 115).

A favorite and ever expanding endeavor of theorists and investigators involves an interpre-

tation of what B. F. Skinner is "really saying." This kind of game is, of course, a natural consequence to the work of prolific influencers, such as Marx, Freud, Watson, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Skinner. Even Skinner is a major participant in interpreting what Skinner "really" said. It is the opinion of this reviewer that Skinner was *really* presenting a basic philosophical/psychological position (paradigm?) about human behavior that offers the basis for developing an exciting society in which the individual can design his or her own environment.

A few verbal nuggets of particular interest:

Skinner's observation in an early "A Sketch for an Epistemology" of *science* wholly in terms of the behavior of "scientists" rather than the behavior of the reified entity of "Science." (p. 116)

"My only hypothesis (which I should have called merely an assumption) was that behavior was lawful—that it was free of caprice and could be described as an orderly system" (p. 233).

"My field was the operant rather than the respondent, and my measure of strength was probability (or at least rate) of the responding rather than magnitude of re-

sponse or latency or after-discharge" (p. 201).

Of course, there are many more examples of observations and conceptualizations mediated by verbal behavior which have been of major influence and to which varied interpretations may be offered. Thus, the most exciting element of this book is that it provides "the raw data" for the host of theorists/entrepreneurs that will almost certainly develop in the pursuit of key issues in the history, psychology, and sociology of science, such as an analysis of the philosophical, intellectual, and cultural roots of behaviorism; an analysis of the theories of causation and the basic beliefs of the behaviorists; comparisons of the backgrounds, theories, and influence of Skinner and Watson; the social, intellectual, and scientific precursors to Skinner; and virtually an unlimited number of other fascinating issues. The task of the historian/philosopher/scientist/therapist/utopian will not be an easy one, but the complexities in life (and "science") offer the fun of a "real" challenge.

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