A Post-Modern Behavior Analysis?

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Neuringer's comments about the nature of science and behaviorist goals and methodologies constitute a significant departure from radical behaviorists' traditional empiricist conception of science. In fact, his recommendations seem so radical (at least in implication) that "humble" hardly seems the appropriate adjective. To be specific, the empiricist view of science includes the assumptions that: (a) All events are strictly determined and science seeks to discover lawful causal relations which obtain among natural entities; (b) The natural world "can in principle be exhaustively described" in a "universal" neutral, descriptive scientific language (Hesse, 1980, p. vii); (c) "Science is ideally a linguistic system in which true propositions are in one-to-one relation to facts, including facts that are not directly observed because they involve hidden entities or properties, or past events or are distant events" (Hesse, 1980, p. vii); and finally, (d) The ideal goals of science are prediction and control of particular events. In an effort to operationalize this philosophical tradition, behavior analysts have endeavored to elaborate a physically concrete, neutral terminology for describing their research procedures and findings, and have developed the methodology of single subject experiments within the "operant chamber" as a means for discovering law-like relations between the behaving organism and its environment.

Recently, however, a school of "post-empiricist" philosophers of science have critiqued the central premises of this positivist program for science (see, Hesse, 1980; Laudan, 1984; Toulmin, 1972). Neuringer's comments, it seems to me, are not inconsistent with many of the observations made by these critics. For instance, Neuringer would rather not posit determinism as a metaphysical given, but would rather assume determinism as a

methodologically useful principle whose limits must be assumed and sought. With regard to the traditional empiricist goals of predication and control, he acknowledges that prediction of individual events is not always possible: "If prediction is used in its broadest sense, then science always involves some aspect of predication; but if it is intended to imply instances, then many behavioral events may be unpredictable." Rather than an exclusive commitment to prediction and control, a humble behaviorist will at times settle for "understanding" defined as "the ability to specify the relative contributions of endogenous versus external influences or predict the circumstances in which unpredictable behaviors are likely to occur."

Neuringer does not directly question the ideal of a neutral, physically concrete scientific language. However, his recommendation that behavior analysts regard their research language as one among many and refrain from insisting that it is the "best," places him apart from traditional empiricism's adamant insistence on a universal, univocal language. Instead, he argues, "Language as instrumental behavior is effective or not, and its effectiveness depends on the linguistic community." If accepted, the cumulative effect of Neuringer's recommendations, it seems to me, would be to temper the behavior analyst's commitment to the empiricist vision of science and, instead, align it with more contemporary visions of science. Certainly, these revisions might lead to a less hostile reception for behavior analysis in the broader academy. However, such a revision raises some serious questions about the identity and integrity of the discipline. For instance, behavior analysts are bound to ask: Is behavior analysis inextricably tied to an empiricist view of science and, therefore, is humble behaviorism antithetical to its

central traditions? Or, if behavior analysis becomes "humble" in Neuringer's senses, will the behavior analytic school cease to be a distinctive research community in the field of psychology? Perhaps these two questions boil down to the question: What aspects of the current identity of behavior analysis may be negotiated without compromising its essence?

Neuringer's proposal of humble behaviorism may have been elaborated less as a response to the changing philosophical thinking about science, however, than as a response to the practical communication problems behaviorists confront as a currently deviant school of psychology. Thus, he suggests that a humble behaviorism might "reduce the threat of behavioral research perceived by many in our society; meliorate fights among sub-disciplines of psychology, so that adversaries might work together toward common goals; and encourage researchers to identify and admit their own ignorance and error, thereby motivating research." Certainly, from the point of view of a rhetorician, efforts to improve one's image and resolve conflicts of ideas crucially involves communication strategies. Neuringer's call for a humble behaviorism thus sounds much like a call for behavior analysts to be more "rhetorically sensitive," that is, more aware that they confront diverse audiences and communication situations as scholars, and more willing to adapt their discourse to these diverse settings.

Perhaps most refreshingly, "humble" behaviorism would favor a cautious pluralism vis à vis the diverse methodological schools of psychology. Behaviorists have, of course, been involved in more than their fair share of adversarial clashes over the merits of "incommensurable" research programs. (see, for instance, Andresen, 1990; Czubaroff, 1988; Lacey, 1980). At their worst, these paradigm conflicts in psychology have led to misunderstandings and refusal to communicate with advocates of radically different research orientations. Instead of the traditional adversarial and dogmatic stance, however, Neuringer proposes that

a humble behaviorist will assume an open, nondogmatic stance toward scholars with different orientations. Indeed, he suggests, "rather than arguing about the best language, all would profit from the more difficult but productive activity of translation." Neuringer recognizes that general communicative sensitivity as well as the ability to translate will be required if humble behaviorists are to adapt to different discourse communities: "Translation brings differing points of view and modes of research to bear upon a given phenomenon and helps to broaden the audience. I ask my students not to talk or write in a particular way, but instead to communicate."

Academic competence from the point of view of a humble behaviorist, then, would presuppose a recognition of the fundamental questions driving all psychologists and a willingness and ability to communicate across methodological schools. This sounds very similar to the cautious pluralism described by Stephen Toulmin and David Leary in a discussion of the future of psychology. In the context of an historical description of how in the 1950s psychologists moved from a single-minded reliance upon neobehaviorist methodologies toward a methodological pluralism, Toulmin and Leary (1985) comment,

If their pluralism had been grounded in a proper understanding of the relations between the methodologies of the different branches of psychology—like the understanding that validates, for example, the division of authority in biology between cell biology, general physiology, developmental biology, and evolution theory—all might yet have been well. (p. 609)

Their point, I think, is that fundamental psychological questions and problems are very diverse and quite properly require numbers of distinct methodologies. Each methodological orientation, in turn, is capable of solving some problems and not others and therefore must recognize its own limits and the virtues of other approaches.

For this reader, Allen Neuringer's essay reflects an awareness of broader changes occurring in our culture's vision of science. Inevitably, when our view of

science is modified, so too must be the identities of the individual natural and social sciences. While radical behaviorists may sense a threat to their clearly but rather narrowly defined identity in the new climate of thinking about science, it is possible that a carefully negotiated broadened identity will result in behaviorism once again becoming a dominant, highly respected, paradigm in psychology.

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