Against Unifying Behaviorism

Bernard Guerin
James Cook University

Hishinuma (1989) and Staats (1986) have recently urged unification of the behaviorisms, arguing that this strategy can help radical behaviorism make an impact on the rest of psychology. In this brief note I wish to argue that we should be hesitant about joining a unification movement (e.g., Staats, 1983). While it might help the impact of radical behaviorism in psychology, it does have drawbacks.

The problem with unification, as I see it, is that it stresses the formation of a foundation or framework within which all researchers should work (Staats, 1983). It is the emphasis on conceptual closure and unity which I believe is counter-productive in the long term, and a more pluralistic philosophy needs to be encouraged (cf. Viney, 1989). If science consists of producing verbal behaviors which specify environmental contingencies (Lee, 1985; Skinner, 1969) then we need to begin with the widest range possible of both verbal and nonverbal contingencies, and allow these to be selected by environmental tests.

We should seek mutation rather than unification in our views, even knowing that of the multiplicity of views produced, only some will be selected and maintained. The mutations will not be limitless, of course, and there will be much overlap with paradigmatic behaviorism in any case. Of those views selected, some will be maintained due to social and political support of the verbal contingencies (cf. pliance, Hayes, 1989); others will be maintained due to environmental support (cf. tracking). From the behavior analytic view, however, only

environmental tracking will maintain in the long run. For this reason, behavior analysts are already careful about following experimental tests rather than following arguments maintained solely by social contingencies.

What this means, in regards to the recent attempts at relocating radical behaviorism in relation to psychology and to unifying different behaviorisms, is that we must analyze the sources of consequences controlling these attempts. The urging and pleas for a unified framework suggest that pliance is being used, and we should therefore be skeptical about the long term maintenance of such frameworks. If the proposals have environmentally favorable consequences for our vocabulary and methods then I believe they will happen anyway.

What we are left with from the arguments given, then, are the remote contingencies being verbally specified by Hishinuma (1989) and Staats (1986) as benefits: "a behavioral paradigm that is cohesive, rich, and heuristic, that will extend radical behaviorism's appeal and influence on various fronts" (Hishinuma, 1989, p. 94). There is enough flexibility and tracking within behavior analysis as it is to contact eventually any of these remote contingencies without unification or a new name. It is with these concerns, then, that I view attempts to unify behaviorism and to find a common framework.

The cognitivists who lived under the political domination of Hullian behaviorism have enjoyed their freedom since the 1960's, but they have "lost their memories" of what they learned as the underdogs, and have now built their own political strongholds in psychology. I, for one, do not wish to repeat this yet again by forming one unified behaviorism which might do the same when the cognitive metaphors fail (see for example, Watkins, 1990).

I would like to thank Georg Eifert for helpful discussions, although he does not necessarily agree with my views.

The author is now at the following address: Department of Psychology, University of Waikato, Private Bag, Hamilton, New Zealand.

Loose ends, inconsistencies, and disunity are poor science only in older philosophies of science. An evolutionary perspective (Skinner, 1969) suggests that they are the very stuff of science and life, and not a crisis. In the long run we must trust the environmental contingencies to select our words and our methods.

REFERENCES

- Hayes, S. C. (Ed.). (1989). *Rule-governed behavior: Cognition, contingencies, and instructional control*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Hishinuma, E. S. (1989). The future of radical behaviorism: Brief comments on Glenn's Editorial and Drash's "On Terms." *The Behavior Analyst*, 12, 93-95.
- Lee, V. L. (1985). Scientific knowledge as rules that guide behavior. *Psychological Record*, 35, 183-192.
- Skinner, B. F. (1969). *Contingencies of reinforcement: A theoretical analysis*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Staats, A. W. (1983). *Psychology's crisis of disunity: Philosophy and method for a unified science*. New York: Praeger.
- Staats, A. W. (1986). Left and right paths for behaviorism's development. *The Behavior Analyst*, 9, 231-237.
- Viney, W. (1989). The cyclops and the twelve-eyed toad: William James and the unity-disunity problem in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 44, 1261-1265.
- Watkins, M. J. (1990). Mediationism and the obfuscation of memory. *American Psychologist*, 45, 328-335.