In Response

On Praxis and Praxics

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In "The Case for Praxics," Epstein (1984) questions the place of the experimental analysis of behavior in the field of psychology. Additionally, he addresses the issue of an appropriate name for the field and presents an alternative, "Praxics." As Epstein points out, others have addressed similar issues (see Hunter, 1925; Skinner, 1968; Tinbergen, 1951). I do not wish to discuss the appropriateness of these issues; rather, I will comment on the choice of the word "praxics."

The introduction of new terms is not unusual in behavior analysis. Skinner (1957), for example, explained the rationale for his choice of the term "verbal behavior" to describe the operant analysis of language: "Its etymological sanction is not too powerful . . . It also has the advantage of being relatively unfamiliar in traditional modes of explanation" (p. 2). Likewise, Epstein (1984) presented his case for praxics, "a blend of physics and praxis, the Greek for 'action' or 'behavior'" (p. 101), as a term to describe a science of behavior. After reviewing other proposed terms, Epstein settled on praxics as a term, which he reports: "hasn't failed yet, . . . is too new to have been abused, . . . describes neither an attitude nor methodology," (p. 107) and simply describes the subject matter. Although "praxics" is too new to have been abused, "praxis" is not. In fact, "praxis" has such a long history of divergent uses that its presence as the root of "praxics" may be "praxics" undoing.

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Nicholas Lobkowitz (1967) reviewed two ways in which Aristotle used the term praxis. First, Aristotle used praxis to refer to biological life activities, and hence was very close to using praxis as a synonym for behavior. Aristotle also used praxis to describe the characteristics of man's ethical and political life.

Bourke (1964) described and quoted the writing of the twelfth century philosopher, Duns Scotus. Bourke critiqued Scotus' description of the nature of human moral action and stated,

that such action, for which [Scotus] uses the Greek word praxis, is nothing but an elicited or commanded act of will: "praxis ad quam extenditur habitus practicus non est nisi actus voluntatis elicited vel imperatus." (p. 176)

Bourke explained,

Notice what this means: all human actions are either elicited (begun and completed within the power of will), or they are commanded (begun within the will and completed in other human potencies that are ordered or directed in their activities by the will). (p. 176)

In the 1800s, philosophers, influenced by Hegel, also discussed praxis. Cieszkowski (1838) advocated that philosophy "become a practical philosophy or rather a philosophy of practical activity, of 'praxis,' exercising a direct influence on social life and developing the future in the realm of concrete activity" (p. 139). Karl Marx showed an interest in praxis and, as McLellan (1969) pointed out, Marx attempted to expand praxis into a general theory. Currently in Yugoslavia there is a journal published entitled "Praxis"; this journal is an outlet for humanistic treatment and interpretations of Marx and Marxism. In other areas of philosophy, as well, like the phenomenological and existentialist movements, authors have addressed human action and praxis.

Philosophy is not alone in its use of the term. For example, in a discussion of psychiatry and positivism, Ingleby (1980) stated,

The crucial difference ascribed to human beings (not a unique property perhaps, but one that emerges gradually in higher animals) is the capacity for meaningful behavior or praxis, the ability to intend or express; furthermore, the nature of praxis is such that it cannot be either described or explained as if it were a thing. (p. 46)

Carlos Castaneda (1974), in his book "Tales of Power," refers to Don Juan's "praxis of dreaming" (p. 10) in a primer on developing mystic ability.

The above examples are by no means a complete history of the term praxis, though they should suffice to present some of the interrelated, often nonbehavioral and unscientific meanings of the term. The term praxis possesses a long and rich history. If the historical use of praxis were limited to the original Greek use of "action," then praxis and praxics would be synonymous, and praxics would not appear to be detrimental as a possible name for the field of behavior analysis. In fact, arguments could be made that the term would be less detrimental than an association with "psychology." I would argue that a different result is indeed likely. Because "praxis" and "praxics" are near-homonyms, the use of one is likely to set the occasion for (or elicit) responses to the other. Thus, the historical use of praxis may prevail and overwhelm responses to praxics. This may not be an association

we wish to establish for a science of behavior.

The example set by Skinner's careful choice of a name befitting an analysis of language does not appear to have been followed in the choice of the term "praxics." The etymological sanction of the latter is powerful and too similar to topics with traditional modes of explanation. Thus, I differ with Epstein and suggest that praxics is not the best choice possible for a term to describe the experimental analysis of behavior.

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