

# Behaviorism and the Construction of Knowledge

By: Qais Faryadi PhD Candidate

University: UiTM Malaysia 2007 (qais@speak-arabic.com)

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## Abstract

*This paper attempts to discuss behaviorism and the construction of knowledge. This review investigates whether behaviorism methodology has any advantages in learning a language in our classroom. This assessment also observes the critics of behaviorism and its weaknesses in a learning environment. This inquiry concentrates on the view point of B.F Skinner, one of the most outspoken behaviorism psychologist and his experimentations about animals. The notion of antimentalism of behaviorism also discussed in the process. The perception of reward and punishment and the function of human mind regarding learning are also discussed.*

*This study further takes a closer look on external and internal factors as preconditions of behaviorist methodology for an effective learning. Moreover, this study examines how behaviorist views man, mind, conscious, the world and the animals. In addition, this investigation summarizes the important concept of behaviorist paradigm such as objectives, teaching methods, theory and how they perceive learners in the classroom.*

This theory postulates that learning has nothing to do with the mind (Jason K McDonald, Stephen C Yanchar, Russell T Osguthorpe 2005). In fact learning occurs with the acquisition of new behavior. It was introduced by B.F. Skinner one of the behaviorist psychologist saying that a measurable learning outcome is only possible if we change the learner's behavior. (Nancy H. Dewald 1999). Behaviorists rely only on observable behavior in order to learn. They do not focus their attention on the mental activities of the learners, because to them learning happens when certain conditions are met. These conditions i.e. behaviors are universal in nature.



(Picture 4: Learning new behavior)

To behaviorists, learning comes from observation of cultures (Henry Plotkin 2003). It comes from the environment. *“The major problems facing the world today can be solved only if we improve our understanding of human behavior”* (Henry D Schlinger. Skeptic 2005). There must be some incentive to create certain responses. According to behaviorism, the incentive may either be positive or negative. If it is the former then the learner will be rewarded, while if it is the latter, the learner will be punished (Lisa M. Baumgartner, Ming Yeh Lee, Sosan Birden, Doris Flower. 2003).

Study has shown that behaviorist methods of reinforcement are very effective in creating positive behavior in almost any learning environment. Such methods positively affect the performances among learners (John Dawning, Tedd Keating, Karl Bennett. 2005).

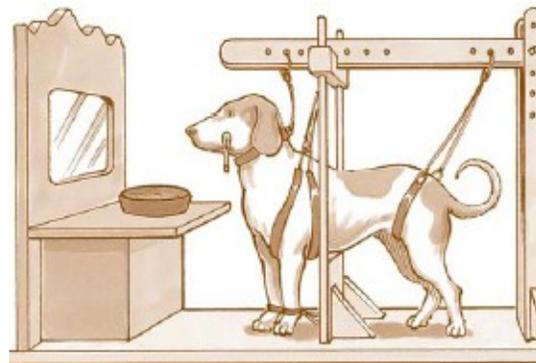
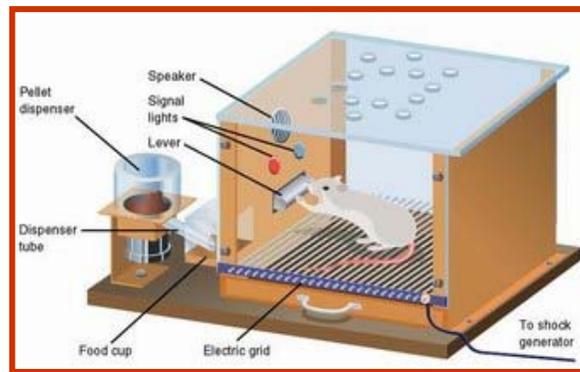
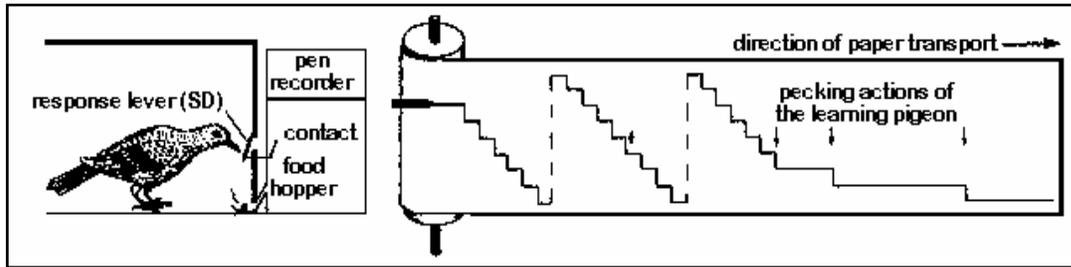
According to behaviorism (Josh Schwieso1999), psychology is a science and is the science of behavior. It has nothing to do with science of the mind. In other words, behaviorism states that the mind does not help a person to acquire knowledge (Thomas H Leahey 2000), but instead it is the psychology of the environment which a person lives. After all, the main stimuli of behaviors come from the external environment rather than the internal. It is the situational interactions (external or environment) which have effect to the particular individual (learner) not to the mind (Robert Marrone.1999).



(Picture 5: Effect of environment on learning)

B.F. Skinner one of the most prominent psychologists of behaviorism theory (Nancy H. Dewald 1999), is well known for his extraordinary work such as experimentation with animals in his so called “Skinner Box”. He believed that if we could change the behavior of a rat which is an animal, then human behavior could also be changed.

These were Skinner's view points as antimentalism (Nerenberg, Bruce Edward. (1993)). His main idea was that man is a poor being and has no indwelling personality.



(Picture 6, 7, 8: Animal behavior in learning.

<http://www.juliantrubin.com/bigten/skinnerbox.html>)

Human beings do not have their own will, intention, self-determination or personal responsibilities (David P. Barash 2005). According to Skinner, we should keep aside modern concepts about freedom and human dignity. Man must be controlled to behave.

Behaviorism further claims that believing in the concept of consciousness is not right and it will take us to the Stone Age, thus showing only human ignorance (Robert Marrone 1999). To behaviorists, man's actions should be controlled (Charlotte Hua Liu & Robert Mathew 2005), as scientists control and influences other natural phenomena. This theory denies the existence of the human mind as a distinct feature to that of animal kingdom. As such, to behaviorist man is like a machine can be switched on and off (Michael L. Birzer. (2003). In other words, man is in fact like an animal and he has no choice but to adapt to the environment (Gene Zimmer 1999).

The theory of behaviorism is in fact a simple theory with an extraordinary message: animals can learn so why can't humans too? Humans are not better than animals (Andrew Stables, Stephen Gough 2006). According to (Claudia Winkler 2003), Watson a behavioral psychologist claims that, "*he could turn the creature into any type of specialist, might select a doctor, lawyer, artist.....even into beggar-man and thief.*" So mankind can be remanufactured to behave properly. This can be achieved through fear, love, anger and so on. (Sarah E. Igo 2006).

*"Under the realm of behaviorism the intellect, feelings, and emotions of a person's inner life are not observable or measurable and therefore not investigated. Thus, a behavioral educator would advocate that effective learning is best accomplished by a change on behavior and relies heavily upon behavioral objectives to accomplish the teaching-learning task."* (Michael L. Birzer 2004).

As such, we learn from our interactions with our environment or surrounding. The process of learning occurs because our learning is associated with a condition and that condition is the environment. (Terry Crow, Lian-Ming Tian 2006). We learn because we follow certain accepted universal laws of behavior and discipline. "*Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of discipline will remove it far from him.*" (Paul D.Wegner 2005).



(Picture 9: Effect of environment on learning)

Behaviorism's theory of positive reinforcement (rewards) deals with the concept of motivation. Its theory of negative reinforcement technique is equally important as prevention. This theory is useful as it is a traditional way of teaching by teachers who believe in the concept of rewards and punishments as the only means of education. Having acknowledged the importance of this theory to the body of existing knowledge, recent findings indicate that behaviorism has staggered too many critical difficulties with some of its very own promises. To date, behaviorism is very much detested. It has lost its might and authority to other renowned theorists such as Bruner's constructivism methodology.

Behaviorism is unable to deal with complex human behavior. It has failed to explain linguistic generativity (Ingvarsson, Einar T, Morris, Edward K. 2004). Skinner's theory of learning, in fact, is not a psychological theory as psychology per se; his theory is all about how to control human behavior. He only manipulated the nature to justify his theory. Skinner merges the idea of Darwinism and behaviorism together to deceive educators in a mere attempt to make his case. In fact as he was going along he was making his weaknesses more obvious.

Behaviorism as (Payal Naik 2003) asserts that, it can treat psychopathological problems; in fact, they cure the symptoms only, leaving the actual problem behind. According to (Payal 2003) the theory of behaviorism is invalid.

Table 1: Behaviorism and the construction of knowledge.



**B.F. Skinner**

<b>Behaviorism and the Construction of Knowledge</b>			
<b>Objectives</b>	<b>Teaching</b>	<b>Theory</b>	<b>Student</b>
Control student's behavior. Predetermination of knowledge. Create new knowledge by Enforcement. Reward and punishment. Experimentation. Animal learns, human learns too.	Teacher is in control. Provides materials. Creates the environments for the study. Teacher is: Enforcer behavioral modifier.	Learning is nothing to do with the state of the mind. Learning occurs with acquisition of new behavior. Learning happens with the observable set of behavior. Learning happens if there is an incentive.	Learner is passive. Waiting for an order. Follows the instruction. No critical thinking.

The theory of behaviorism is not a comprehensive theory as it excludes discussion about the human mind and does not take it into any consideration. Human behavior is very complex and can not be understood simply through experimenting with animals (Alissa D. Eischens 2003). To behaviorists there is a global crisis, and in order to cure that crisis, we have to change human behavior. But what happens if that global problem can not be cured? They still have a treatment by using psychiatric methodology (drugs and brain surgery). As a matter of fact behaviorists are creating more problem than cure and call it global crisis and mental disorder. Then they pretend to apply a theory which is completely unworkable (Gene Zimmer 1999).

In spite of contradictions in behaviorism methodology, one can not deny its usefulness in the classroom, notably, the concept of reward and punishment. (Helga Lejeune, Marc Richelle, J H Wearden 2006). In reality one can not totally reject the effect of the environment on human behavior. Although the idea of accepting behaviorism as a comprehensive theory should be discarded, its ideas and research must be given some due consideration (Xochitl de la Piedad, Douglas Field, Howard Rachlin 2006).



(Picture 10: Effect of environment on human behavior)

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