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Reflexive Paper

Applying Behaviorism: My life reinforced.

In life we all act certain ways for different reasons. We eat because we are hungry and feel enjoyment through food. We work at a job to receive money to buy clothes, toys, food and pay bills. We read and study in school so we can learn and make ourselves more marketable. Do we perform these tasks merely to get rewarded for our actions? Are we merely machines or animals to be programmed? As a parent, I often wonder how I can help my son progress and learn new skills. As a teacher, I ask myself how I can motivate my students to learn and practice. How can I motivate myself to study and work harder? Does behaviorism contain the answers to my conundrums or should I look elsewhere? In this paper, I will examine various instances in my life where the theories of behaviorism are demonstrated and how they explain how we learn and where they fall short.

My son, Porter, is almost 10 months old. A few weeks ago my wife and I were not getting enough sleep because he would wake us up in the middle of the night, screaming at the top of his lungs, in hopes that we would visit him. Well, the tolls and pressures of work and graduate school caused my wife and me to seek help. Around this time, I was learning of behaviorism and the marvelous ideas in changing behavior. Since Porter can not speak yet, rationalizing with him verbally would be out of the question. Frustrated, I went to the local library in search of a book that would contain some answers to help us and him sleep through the night. I had heard from other people to just let him cry himself to sleep. Some of the books praised this technique while others

claimed it only made things worse. One of the books espoused the method of setting a consistent routine and helping them go to sleep on their own. The author recommended that we leave him in his crib and let him cry for five minutes. After five minutes, we would return and pat him on the back or set him back down and then leave the room. We would repeat the procedure and then wait ten minutes, then another ten, and then fifteen. We tried it that night, and he was able to go to sleep after only forty-five minutes. That night he only woke up once. The next day, he fell asleep within fifteen minutes, and only woke up once again. That was an amazing improvement to go from waking up three to five times per night to only once. Plus, he was learning to soothe himself to sleep.

We faded his need for us to help him go to sleep until he could do it on his own. The reinforcement we gave was the intermittent comforting and reassuring him that we were not abandoning him. Thus we went from having to pick him up and rock him to sleep to letting him put himself to sleep. This method worked because he knows that he's not abandoned and that we will come back. The variable interval of coming in every five, ten or fifteen minutes allows him to go sleep faster than a set interval of coming in every five minutes because a set interval would probably be easily noticeable and not as effective. So in essence we gradually removed the reinforcement of his parents' comfort and replaced it with the benefits of sleep.

An opposite but related example would be of my son learning to walk. We in essence are shaping his behavior to the point where walking will become second nature to him. At first we would just have Porter stand up and see if he could go on his own, or we would walk while holding both his hands. One day we sat on the grass and had him walk between us. Once he took a few steps, we would clap, cheer and smile at him so he would

repeat the task. Our praise and hugs were his positive reinforcement. It would have been interesting to study, yet horrible to contemplate, what might have happened if we had not encouraged him to walk or even punished him for walking. We have shaped his behavior by decreasing our level of praise as he learns to walk more and more. This positive reinforcement implemented through the shaping of behavior occurs at a variable-ratio interval. In our family, some haven't yet seen him walk and so he gets more feedback from them than his parents. Thus, he doesn't know exactly when the praise will come and how much will be displayed so it is a variable-ratio level. As Porter grows and progresses, he will of course learn new skills and traits but not all of them will be at a basic psychomotor skill level. Can he learn attitudes and cognitive knowledge through the principles of reinforcement or are they limited to purely behavioristic scenarios?

I was watching the second season of a TV show called LOST that demonstrates some interesting aspects of behaviorism. In the show, the people on the Island found a man in a bunker, all by himself that was entering a code into a computer every 108 minutes. The man didn't understand why he was entering in the code or what the consequences would be if he didn't enter in the code. The man, out of fear, blindly entered the code for days or maybe even years. The only information was an orientation video, put together by a psychologist, telling him what he should be doing. This bunker in my opinion was a human Skinner box where the people would press the button to alleviate the worry of what would happen if the code was not entered. They used negative reinforcement to induce the man to press the button. Because it was set up for every 108 minutes, the man was stuck in the bunker and couldn't go anywhere.

The human Skinner box example raises the question: are we humans just like beasts that can be controlled and manipulated depending on the rewards of our actions? I don't think so. I believe we are more than just the sum total of our actions. Thus, I think that behaviorism works well to instruct a person how to perform a process, but lacks the fundamental reason of how and why we do the process.

In this semester of school, it has been interesting to have a decreased emphasis on the outward reinforcement of grades and to have the focus more on learning the material. In some classes, we are asked to read the required material and then come back and teach through a PowerPoint presentation or discussion questions the things we have learned. A varied amount of people are asked to participate each time and are called at random. This variable ratio reinforcement encourages us to be prepared for each class and learn the material appropriately. This encouragement remains in the extrinsic outward reinforcement, but it can become intrinsically motivating. We don't understand all the reasons why behaviorism works, but we can learn valuable skills through applying its principles.

In learning this I thought of how to apply variable reinforcement to helping one of my cello students review the pieces that he had already played. I came up with an idea that in order for him to go on to the next song, he will have to pass of the one the he is working on and then any two of the songs they he has played previously. I haven't seen the results yet but am confident that he will progress faster and practice more by following this program. By praising or correcting my students, I also reinforce particular behaviors.

I have even used behaviorism in my own life by rewarding myself when I accomplished something I don't want to do or I weeded out some inappropriate behaviors. I have also used chaining in practicing my cello. I would take a difficult passage play one note and then add one each time until I could play the passage. This would take a lot of time and sometimes it was hard to be motivated to learn what I needed to. Another tactic would be to play through a passage 10 times without making a mistake. The problem with this form of instruction is the lack of positive reinforcement I feel as I complete the task. Are the benefits of playing the passage well worth the effort expended on my part?

Behaviorism works best when applied to behaviors. When trying to describe how abstract and cognitive information is learned, behaviorism can not explain how we process the information. Behaviorism focuses only on the extrinsic motivations and not on the internal working of our minds. It fails to recognize the roles of reasoning and logic and values that influence our decision and actions each and every day. I have learned through my experience that reinforcement can be very effective in teaching basic psychomotor skills to anyone, but we are more than just animals reacting to a stimulus. We can choose to ignore the reinforcement and not be controlled. We have the option to just leave the hanger and not enter the code every 108 minutes. Our choice depends on the costs associated with the decisions we make and to the extent that we are in control of our domain, and not to be controlled.