Psychology B.F Skiner Essay, Research Paper

B.F. Skinner

Running head: B.F. Skinner and His Influence in Psychology B.F. Skinner and His Influence in Psychology Abstract B.F. Skinner was one of the most influential theorists in modern psychology. His work was very important and has been studied by many for years. Skinner was a very straightforward man and a very educated man. His theories have helped mankind in many ways. He has studied the behavior patterns of many living organisms. Skinner was a well-published writer. His work has been published in many journals. He also has written many books on behaviorism. His most important work was the study of behaviorism. First began by John B. Watson, behaviorism is one of the most widely studied theories today. B.F. Skinner and His Influence in Psychology B.F. Skinner was one of the most famous of the American psychologists. He was born in Pennsylvania in 1904. Skinner was the father of modern behaviorism. Skinner did not get into psychology until he was in graduate school at Harvard. He was driven to Psychology after reading about the experiments of Watson and Pavlov. He received his doctoral degree in three years and taught at the University of Minnesota and the University of Indiana and finally returned to his alma mater at Harvard. Skinner contributed to psychological behaviorism by performing experiments that linked behaviors with terms commonly used to describe mental states. Skinner was responsible for some famous experiments such as the Skinner box . Skinner also wrote some very famous books. One of them was The Behavior of Organisms . This book describes the basic points of his system. Another was Walden Two. This book describes a utopian society that functions on positive reinforcement. Skinner was a very productive person until his death in 1990 at the age of 86. Behaviorism is a school of thought in psychology that is interested in observable behavior. Skinner said, Behaviorism is not the science of human behavior; it is the philosophy of that science (Skinner, 1974). There are various types of behavior, such as innate behavior. Innate behaviors are certain behaviors that we are born with, such as eating when we are hungry and sleeping when we are tired. Early Life Burrhus Frederic Skinner was born in Susquehanna, Pennsylvania on March 20, 1904 to William Arthur and Grace Madge Skinner. Skinner s home was a warm and stable place. He lived in the house he was born in until he went off to college. Skinner also had a younger brother named Edmond James Skinner, born November 6, 1906. Skinner was very fond of his brother and loved him very much. At the young age of sixteen, Edmond died of a cerebral aneurysm. Skinner was a very inventive young man. He always was making or building things, such as wagons, model airplanes, etc. He also attempted to invent a perpetual motion machine, but it failed. He also read about animals. He collected toads, lizards, and snakes. He trained pigeons to do tricks after he saw them performing one year at a fair. Training the pigeons probably was where he got his ideas of operant conditioning. He attended Susquehanna High School just like his mother and father. In his graduating class there were only eight people including him. He was a very intellectual boy. He reported that he really enjoyed school. Over the four years in high school Skinner became quite good at mathematics and reading Latin, but was weak at science. He made up for it though, because he was always performing physical and chemical experiments while he was at home. His father was an avid book collector. Skinner always had a good library of books around his house. Skinner recalled the little collection of applied psychology journals that his father had bought. Those books could have been the starting point in his psychology career. Skinner grew up in a very religious family. His grandmother often reminded him of the concept of hell. His mother once washed his mouth out with soap literally for saying a bad word. His father never punished him, but he told him of the punishments that awaited him if he ever turned out to be a criminal. Overall Skinner had a good and happy childhood. College Life After graduating high school, Skinner went to Hamilton College where he majored in English Literature and minored in Romance Languages. He was drawn toward English when he was in high school by one of his teachers named Miss Graves. She also was responsible for his enjoyment of art and sculpting. Skinner never really fit into the campus life and he was not much of a sportsman. He said my shins were cracked in ice hockey and better players bounced basketballs off my cranium (Boring, 1967). Skinner s freshman year did not turn out to be what he expected. He felt that the college was pushing him around with unnecessary requirements, such as daily chapel and physical education. Skinner s college life became better as the years went on. He was very comfortable with college life by his senior year. Skinner turned out to be quite the joker in college. He and a friend once printed up a poster that said that Charles Chaplin was coming to speak about being in the silent movies. They printed up some copies and distributed them throughout the campus. The effect of their actions was more than they expected. A large amount of people showed up to see the famous star that was not coming. The kicker was that Skinner said that the presentation was under the direct supervision of Skinner s English composition teacher and all of the blame was on him when Mr. Chaplin did not show up. Skinner graduated soon after that, and it was the start of a new life. Psychological Beginning After graduating Skinner started writing, but that did not work out. Skinner started classes at Harvard University studying for his Masters Degree in Psychology. Skinner always had been interested in animal behavior after seeing the performing pigeons when he was younger. He also was interested in human behavior as well. This began when the man that taught him how to play the saxophone when he was younger told him how he would entertain troops. He would write the alphabet forward with his right and backwards with his left hand, add up some figures given to him and answer questions from the crowd all at the same time. The man said that it gave him a headache. Skinner wanted to know how he did all of that. Skinner read some of the works of some famous psychologists. He read some books on Pavlov and the work that he did with the dogs and the work of John B. Watson, a famous behaviorist. He really became interested in behaviorism when he met two men, Fred Keller and Charles Trueblood. Keller was a strict behaviorist. Skinner saw Trueblood carrying caged rats that he was working with in the laboratory. After that Skinner really started hitting the books. He had a complex schedule of waking up, studying during breakfast, attending classes, study until nine o clock at night, and then going to bed. He held this regimen for two years straight. He did not have much of a life during those two years. When Skinner began working on his doctoral degree, he was working part of the time at a medical school and the other part in a subterranean laboratory with his animals. He remained in that laboratory for a total of five years. While working on his research, Skinner found that Pavlov had given him the most influence in the experimental method. Pavlov said, control the environment and you will see order in behavior (Boring, 1967). Skinner first used the term operant when some of his papers came under attack. He said, the term operant was to identify behavior traceable to reinforcing contingencies rather than to eliciting stimuli (Boring, 1967). Behaviorism and Skinner Over the years after receiving his doctoral degree Skinner became a strict behaviorist. In 1964, Skinner gave a speech on what he called The Science of Behavior and Human Dignity. The main point of the speech was that people blame their shortcomings on the environment and take all the credit for their achievements. This belief wound up being the theme of one of Skinner s books. It was called Beyond Freedom and Dignity , published in 1971.This was a very popular book and a very unpopular book. Many thought that Skinner did not believe in freedom and dignity. He wanted people to see that if we could move beyond those things then perhaps our society could move on to be a more realized one. Skinner believed that the study of behavior depends on what the organism should and should not do. Skinner also was very productive in the laboratory. His most famous experiment was the Skinner box . The Skinner box was just a plain looking box that could measure conditioning in many different ways. Here is how it works. A hungry rat is placed in the box and left alone. The rat will survey its environment. The rat eventually will find a lever and when it is pressed, food is delivered. In operant conditioning terms, the food reinforces the rat s behavior of pressing the lever. Skinner explained how this experiment worked in his first major work The Behavior of Organisms: an experimental analysis . He explained that the type of conditioning the rat underwent was called free operant conditioning . It was free because the rat was uninterrupted and free to press the lever as many times as it wanted. He explained it like this because he wanted to distinguish himself from Ivan Pavlov and his dogs. One difference that was pointed out was that the dogs had to hear the bell in order to start salivating. The rat was given no stimulation; it just pressed the lever because it knew there would be food. Skinner really wanted to study human behavior. The box did little of that, but he found that if you change a human s environment, a behavioral change would occur just like the rat s behavior would change, if you change the lever pressing. So, the main idea of behaviorism is that human behavior is a product of the stimulus-response interaction and that behavior is modifiable (Behaviorism, 1997). In another of Skinner s famous works he talks about his three-part thesis on human behavior. He believed that biology, genotype, and conditioning all work together in natural selection, operant conditioning, and in the development of social environments. Skinner s life appeared to be very good. He had a good family, two loving children and wife. He also had a good job teaching Psychology at his alma mater, Harvard University. America lost a very important, intellectual man in 1990 when B.F. Skinner died at the age of 86 of leukemia that he had contracted when he was younger. Even though he was dying he still delivered a paper to the American Psychological Association. His work and theories always will be looked at and studied far into the future. Conclusion B.F. Skinner was one of the most important American psychologists ever. He was known as the father of operant conditioning. Skinner s experiments have paved the way for many ideas and theories that may be developed by future generation psychologists. He was responsible for writing many books that also have helped in understanding behaviorism. He tried to explain how human behavior would change if the environment were manipulated. In my opinion, Skinner was one of the most well known psychologists of all time. He was a very intellectual man and will be remembered far into the future. References Behaviorism. (1997). The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved April 07,1998 from the World Wide Web: http://www.utm.edu./research/iep/b/behavior.htm Boring, E.G. (1967). A History of Psychology in Autobiography. New York: Irvington Publishers. Retrieved April 07,1998 from the World Wide Web: http://lafayette.edu/allanr/early.html Skinner, B.F. (1974). About Behaviorism. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Press.