

Promoting Behavior Analysis

continued from p 4

happy for their faculty to gain publicity for the institution by writing in the popular press.

Lacking strong automatic positive reinforcement, there isn't much other reinforcement for the kind of verbal behavior I've recommended. There is obviously much

more reinforcement for talking amongst ourselves and posting on listserves. So, we need to figure out a way to encourage the kind of verbal behavior I am suggesting.

If we don't want to continue to be misrepresented or considered to be dead, or, worse, irrelevant, we need to promote behavior analysis outside our field and outside academia.

Skinner's Black Scorpion

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B. F. Skinner began working on a behavioral analysis of language in 1934 as a result of a challenge from Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead was perhaps the most prominent philosopher of the time, known best for his landmark three volume set co-authored with Bertrand Russell titled *Principia Mathematica* (1910, 1912, 1913). Skinner and Whitehead had been seated next to each other at a dinner at the Harvard Society of Fellows. Skinner (1957) describes the interaction as follows.

We dropped into a discussion of behaviorism which was then still very much an "ism" and of which I was a zealous devotee. Here was an opportunity which I could not overlook to strike a blow for the cause....Whitehead... agreed that science might be successful in accounting for human behavior provided one made an exception of verbal behavior. Here, he insisted something else must be at work. He brought the discussion to a close with a friendly challenge: "Let me see you," he said "account for my behavior as I sit here saying 'No black scorpion is falling upon this table.'" The next morning I drew up the outline of the present study (p. 457).

It took Skinner 23 years to fill in the details of his outline, which he published in his book *Verbal Behavior* (1957). The end result was so significant to Skinner that he predicted, "*Verbal Behavior*...will, I believe, prove to be my most important work" (1978, p. 122).

In the section of *Verbal Behavior* titled "Two personal epilogues" (pp. 453-460) Skinner first considers "The validity of the author's verbal behavior" with a very interesting reflection on his verbal behavior project. The second epilogue addresses the challenge by Alfred North Whitehead and his answer to the black scorpion question posed to him in 1934. First, Skinner points out that his answer is only a

guess since the original controlling variables are no longer present. It might also be pointed out that Whitehead had died 10 years earlier and could not refute Skinner's response to the challenge.

However, a few relevant facts about the conditions under which Professor Whitehead made his remark are available. So far as I know there was no black scorpion falling on the table. The response was emitted to make a point--taken, as it were, out of the blue. This was, in fact, the point of the example: why did Professor Whitehead not say "autumn leaf" or "snowflake" rather than "black scorpion?" The response was meant to be a poser just because it was not obviously controlled by a present stimulus....Perhaps there was a stimulus that evoked the response black scorpion falling on this table, which in turn led to the autoclitic No....I suggest, then, that black scorpion was a metaphorical response to the topic under discussion. The black scorpion was behaviorism (p. 458).

Skinner goes on in this section to identify another source of control for the comment. The fact that he had not convinced Whitehead that his version of behaviorism was something new that had not been available before meant that "on this pleasant and stimulating table no black scorpion had fallen....There was no cause for alarm" (p. 459).

References

Skinner, B. F. (1957). *Verbal behavior*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Skinner, B. F. (1978). *Reflections on behaviorism and society*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.