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My Daughter Broke the Lamp – Radical Behaviorism

Well, as the title states, my two-year-old daughter recently broke a large floor lamp in the family room. As you can imagine, my wife and I were very upset. To be honest, my personal anger was not with my daughter but with the fact that she is only two and unable to really understand what she did and why she did it. She is at an age where she cannot be reasoned with, which is always quite frustrating for me. I have said, on more than one occasion, just how wonderful it was when my older children (seven and four) reached an age where they could be reasoned with. It seems to be almost therapeutic for me to be able to explain to them what all the excitement is about when they have done things similar to breaking a floor lamp. Not only do they seem to learn and understand in some small way what they did and why it was not good, but I am also able to deal with the tension or anger that I feel in the process. There also seems to be a slowing down of the inappropriate behavior. With a two-year-old it is not possible to curtail the undesirable behavior with a discussion. This is where I finally made a connection between parenting and behaviorism which is beyond just a tongue-in-cheek comment to another father in class.

While studying Pavlov, Skinner and behaviorism in previous communication and sociology courses, I had a difficult time seeing the significance of conditioning a dog to salivate. I even had a little fun of my own with an aquarium of fish that was situated on the top of a piano at home. I had just been through a discussion in a high school class (don't remember which one) about Pavlov and his dogs which gave me an idea. I made it

a point to always feed the fish just after I started practicing the piano. It took about a month for me to see the fruits of my experiment. One evening I sat down to play the piano and noticed that the fish all moved toward the top of the tank. Over time it became more obvious. The fish eventually began showing aggressive feeding behavior which stirred the water in the top of the tank every time the piano was played, regardless of whether or not they were fed. In a related experience, I have also watched as fish swarm to a glass-bottomed boat during a trip to Catalina Island off the coast of California due to conditioning brought on by years of feeding them so the tourists would get their money's worth.

My difficulty with behaviorism has always been the fact that most of the substantive results presented in my introductory courses had to do with the simple minds of animals. It was almost insulting for me to think that these experiments could be used to affect the behavior of people. To me, it had to be conspired manipulation due to the fact that I figured that no one would allow themselves to knowingly be affected like the animals were. Little did I know that not only do I utilize behaviorist ideas with my daughter, I have also been affected by them myself. The realities that I face in my life, such as my desires for income, perceived success and acknowledgement place me in a position to be affected by behaviorist principles. I will begin with a short discussion about my daughter and finish up with the admission of myself being affected.

It doesn't take long for a new father to learn that toddlers don't understand instructions. It is easy to become frustrated when, while trying to watch a movie together as a family, a request to "stop standing on the couch" is ignored. Soon it becomes more of a command and eventually there always seems to be a punishment involved. After

prolifically using punishment with little success with my first two children, I began to finally learn what was effective and what was not when it comes to changing the behavior of a little one. Punishing a child for a behavior really is the easiest way to go but unfortunately there are drawbacks. First, it seems clear that more often than not a small child does not immediately comprehend the connection between the behavior in question and the punishment. It takes time for this connection to be made and unfortunately a number of other undesirable connections may be made in the process. Perhaps the child will simply develop an aversion to the person meting out the punishment and rather than really changing the behavior, just avoid the person who doesn't like it. Punishment, especially when physical in nature, also tends to serve as an effective demonstration of using force, a negative behavior, to get what you want.

My wife and I are shifting our efforts from punishment to positive reinforcement which requires a bit more patience and creativity but creates a longer lasting effect. Since the lamp episode, in our effort to stop our daughter from standing on the couch while watching movies, we put other options in place that are desirable to her. We bought her a small, special chair that is all her own. This is something that she loves and helps keep her from the couch. We also began to only allow the children to eat the obligatory popcorn while they are seated on the floor (or in the special chair for the little one). It is great to watch them go straight for the floor when the popcorn arrives. These efforts have been successful and I now see how the primary reinforcer (the popcorn) and conditioned reinforcer (the chair) are really related to behaviorist theory.

It also occurs to me that, even though I thought it couldn't happen, my own behavior has been affected by utilizing principles of behaviorist theory. Most notably, I

have noticed that in my work at USU over the last three years, my behavior has changed based on the use of behaviorist principles. When I began my new job it quickly became clear that there were differences in the way my supervisor and I approached and accomplished things. Though, this was never a problem for me, my supervisor felt otherwise. I began to notice his discontent as we worked on articulation projects together but didn't understand why I didn't seem to have his support. Over time I began to feel down, under-appreciated and afraid I would lose my job.

At the start of a new project I decided I would ask for my supervisor's input about how to proceed. He seemed pleased that I had asked and offered his suggestions. This, in turn, affected me and I followed his suggestions even though they were contrary to how I would go about things and took me much longer. It is important to note here that in the course of completing these projects the end results would always be the same regardless of the process used. Ultimately, I began to use my supervisor's methods more and more. The approval, praise and job security that I was looking for came from changing my behavior.

Alas, I am learning. I believe that I can now see more parallels of behaviorism and how the theories came about. It is obvious that the measurable nature of the theory is attractive. I also can see why cognitive theories came about with the discontent of behaviorism's limitation of behavior only. It seems to me that since my needs include more than just basic biological requirements, there has to be more than just a black box between my ears (though some may argue...). Therefore, are there actually cognitive processes in humans that precede behaviorism that "set up" the framework for behaviorist principles to work?