

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF JOHN B. WATSON'S
ORIGINAL WRITING:
"BEHAVIORISM AS A BEHAVIORIST VIEWS IT"
(1913)**

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a critical analysis of John Broadmus Watson's 1913 paper titled *Behaviorism As A Behaviorist Views It*. In addition to outlining the history of this school of thought, the article highlights Watson's contributions to the acceptance of Behaviorism within the annals of psychology. Readers will be enlightened about the various ways that Watson's Behaviorism has paved the way for the growth of psychology in general and various subspecialties in particular.

Introduction

The road to ‘truth’ as it relates to human behavior has been a work in progress for several centuries with its paving originating from the intrigue of such renowned philosophers such as Descartes, Galileo and Kant. Among the many highways, avenues and footpaths that have been forged to date, the journey to psychological epistemology began in order to know and understand the making and sustenance of mankind’s cognitions, emotions and behaviors. When surveying the history of this esteemed field, one would be remiss for failing to acknowledge the inroads that theorists from the School of Behaviorism have made in the quest to delineate *A Priori* and *A Posteriori* knowledge. In seeking to know and understand which aspects of human behavior have been derived from self evident truths vis-à-vis experience, John Broadus Watson is credited with revolutionizing the subfield of Behaviorism for maximum utility.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to provide a critical analysis of John Broadmus Watson’s 1913 paper titled *Behaviorism As A Behaviorist Views It*. In addition to outlining the history of this school of thought, the article highlights Watson’s contributions to the acceptance of Behaviorism within the annals of psychology. Readers will be enlightened about the various ways that Watson’s Behaviorism has paved the way for the growth of psychology in general and various subspecialties in particular.

History of Behaviorism

Behaviorism as a theoretical option in psychology dates back to the twentieth century and defied the tenets of experimental psychology which sought to analyze conscious experiences in favor of objectively studying animals and humans (Windholtz, 1995). This original writing set forth for review is known to many as the ‘Manifesto of Behaviorism’ and chronicles Watson’s original prescription for a new path within psychology – Behaviorism. During this, his first in a series of lectures at Columbia University, Watson – whom many hail as America’s leading comparative psychologist – made several statements that were considered boldly adventuresome for his day given his lack of empirical evidence to substantiate them. Perhaps most notably is his assertion that “behaviorism is the only consistent and logical functionalism” (Huber, Edwards & Bownton, 2000, p 185).

Based on his research on higher order animals, Watson strove to bring to psychology the same measure of objectivity that marked some of the other traditional sciences, such as physics

and chemistry. At the time of presenting this 1913 lecture at Columbia University, Titchener's structuralism and James' functionalism were predominant. For this reason, Watson strongly believed that psychology, as a science to be taken seriously and accepted by society, was doomed to failure because of its esoteric reliance on subjective descriptions as well as the interpretation of conscious experiences and mental processes. In order to fulfill its goal of predicting and controlling behavior, Watson mandated the use of physical stimuli as the means to an end in the investigation of the various mental states (Huber *et al*, 2000). He further agitated that the focus of human psychology be that of "the behavior of the human being" with an emphasis on the word '*being*' as a verb – i.e. the individual in action and evolving (Rilling, 2000, p. 276).

Critique of 1913 Article

While Watson's 1913 piece makes an interesting and inspiring read for those whose theoretical orientation is cognitive-behavioral, there are some omissions and oversights in his writing that cannot go unmentioned. Much of the discourse may be deemed a 'bashing' of the structuralist and functionalist theories on introspection and other subjective methods for analyzing human behavior and consciousness. While one may agree that the focus of this science should not have been consumed by these, readers may find themselves disagreeing with Watson's total denial of the worth in studying mental processes and the benefit of having the individual share his/her perspective on them.

While Watson does advocate for uniformity in experimental procedures and a solidified stance in dealing with the psychological issues at hand, he failed to offer solutions as to how this could be accomplished. Perhaps this is due to his view that changes were inevitable hence he may not have been convicted to be an initiator of such solutions. This may be the reason that the school of Behaviorism lost vital ground in its battle for acceptance in the realm of Psychology until recent efforts by Neo-Behaviorists secured its place in the annals of this science.

Theories Similar to Watsonian Behaviorism

Many texts bespeak Behaviorism as an American theory with its pioneering work dating back solely to Watson. However, Windholtz (1995) reminds us that Watson merely synthesized, as the doctrine of Behaviorism, the undercurrent discord of many with the prevailing theories of the day. Via his introduction of Emmanuel Enchman, a Soviet Behaviorist, Windholtz highlights the accomplishments of this innovator who, unlike Watson, espoused the *Theory of New Biology*. A comparison of the two perspectives reveals that they are mirror images of the same ideals. Given that Watson's and Enchman's were generated at roughly the same time frame despite their location on opposite hemispheres, this may be explained via the German philosophy of *zeitgeist*

or the spirit of the time. Objectivism pervaded the era, which may account for the similarity of their philosophies and symbiotic creation using objective methods and Darwin's concept of adaptation to study reflex responses. Although Behaviorism flourished in Western society due to the free expression of ideas allowed there, it never really gained prominence in the Soviet as a result of that society's totalitarianism and suppressive strategies.

Contributions of Watsonian Behaviorism

Contrary to the some of the initial views presented in Kunkel (1996), he maintains that Watsonian Behaviorism did have a significant effect on society in general, and the outgrowth of the various subfields of psychological growth in particular, namely social psychology and cognitive behaviorism. As that author later points out, most social psychologists agree that mental processes and representations are not independent of each other, or the environmental context they occur within. This has been especially helpful in fostering an understanding of issues such as persistence, social loafing, and a general analysis of the successes and failures of daily life.

Watson decried the stalwart theories of Structuralism and Functionalism due in great measure to his belief that they lacked the applicability, consistency and logic for the more pressing issues within the field. This fueled his desire for a more useful explanation of human behavior and the objective measurement of human processes. For this reason Watson is credited with sparking the flame that has now blazed as the field of Applied Psychology. It was in his 1913 publication that he urged for more useful endeavors within psychology – beyond consciousness and unconsciousness – to principles that were beneficial to the legal, educational, medical and business arenas (Mills, 1999).

Due in great measure to Watson's work, the areas of legal & forensic psychology blossomed and continues have utility as it relates to courtroom matters (e. g. reliability of eyewitness testimony, fitness to stand trial, etc). Rilling (2000) attributes Watson's interest in elucidating psychopathology as pivotal to the unearthing of conditioned emotional responses, which many herald as his major contribution. As a result of Watsonian Behaviorism, an even brighter light was shed on the phenomenal processes underlying several pressing clinical issues such as mental disorders, drug addiction and phobias originating with the infamous Little Albert experiments with 1919/1920(Huber *et al*, 2000).

Watsonian Behaviorism propelled the concept of learning into the spotlight of interest for mainstream researchers. New energy invigorated experiments on learning processes resulting in monumental discoveries and, subsequently, therapeutic interventions for matters related to emotions, instincts and habit formation. Using the conclusions drawn from animal research, Watson did much to enlighten educators about the complexities of learning, motivation, response generation and problem solving (Mills, 1999).

In terms of his contribution to the continual evolution of theoretical standpoints, Murray, Kilgour and Wasylikiw (2000) credit Watson for having brought credence to some of the psychoanalytic concepts such as the role of early childhood experiences, trauma and

relationships with significant social agents, primarily maternal figures, in the formation a child's personality, capabilities and propensities. For this reason, Watson influence is also notable in child rearing philosophies by his use of objective and empirical methods of study.

Although Watsonian Behaviorism seemed not to have been initially embraced, Mills (1999) reveals that it sparked embers that later caught afire as the field of Neo-behaviorism as popularized by Hull, Tolman and Skinner. It was Watson's mandate for objective findings that fostered the theoretical sophistication and strong research basis that neo-behaviorism is known for – particularly in the realm of habit formation/maintenance and addictions. Murray *et al* (2000) also credit Watson with innovations in the field of language believing as he purported that it was merely an extension of a mental representation, and deemed thoughts to be un verbalized habits rooted in emotional associations.

Concluding Remarks

The goal of this article is to highlight one of John Broadmus Watson's original writings as a means of enlightening readers about the foundations of Behaviorist viewpoint. After exposure to this reading and to the other works that elaborated on the pioneering efforts of Watson, readers may no doubt concur with Mary Cover Jones, his last graduate student and a behavioral scientist in her own right. She described her mentor as having shaken the core of European –bred psychological tradition which spurred the way for action and reform (Mills, 1999). In conclusion, Watson is to be applauded for his perseverance while yet acknowledging that his position could be easily debunked. He willingly endured the ridicule but nevertheless maintained optimistic openness about the future development of psychology. Without Watsonian Behaviorism, psychology's acceptance as real and noteworthy science may never have been actualized. For this reason, Watson's theory of Behaviorism is hailed by many as a panacea to the scourge of subjectivism and pseudo-science that pervaded his day.

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