

TEACHING ABOUT PRIVATE EVENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT: The widespread misrepresentation of behavior analysis may reflect the difficulties of teaching its views on private events. This paper discusses issues concerned with the analysis of private events; it also contains exercises in self-observation that are intended for use in the classroom. Students who are actively encouraged to participate in self-observation under the guidance of a behavioral perspective may be more likely to identify misrepresentations of behavior analysis when they appear in other courses.

Key -words: private events, self-observation, introspection, classroom exercises.

Though vast in quantity, the great majority of behavioral findings tell us little of worth about ourselves. In a sense, having denied the importance of subjective data, their findings appear limited, alien, even "soul-less." (Spinelli, 1989, p. 175)

Apart from Skinner's writings, there is very little behavior-analytic literature to guide those who are interested in exploring private events (cf. Neuringer, 1981; Ulrich, 1975).

Teaching students the perspective of behavior analysis is a complex task that directly confronts the problem of private events. That is, students are required to learn not only about how contingencies control behavior, but in the process they must also monitor their own private events. They must learn to become self-aware with respect to the impact that their mentalistic training has on their own analyzing and categorizing behavior. Skinner (1953) drew attention to the social skills required by the teacher to achieve this effect:

. . . self-observation is also the product of discriminative contingencies, and if a discrimination cannot be forced by the community, it may never arise. Strangely enough, it is the community which teaches the individual to "know himself." (pp. 260-261)

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

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In some respects, teaching a student to discriminate between a behavioral perspective and a mentalistic perspective is tantamount to conducting "educational therapy" whereby intrusive private events that masquerade as explanations (and which might interfere with effective action) are brought under control. In other words, students who locate explanations for another person's behavior inside that person must eventually learn to discriminate the function of their own private changes in the context supporting their observation (cf. Hineline, 1990). They must learn to adopt the perspective of "the other one" (Skinner, 1974, p. 171) so that they can address issues that arise when epistemological assumptions are brought to bear in a scientific analysis (Hayes, Hayes, & Reese, 1988; Morris, Higgins, & Bickel, 1982; Leigland, 1989). For the student, the transition to this new mode of functioning can often be a difficult journey because of the sustained attack on established beliefs by behavioral literature. At the same time, however, new avenues for self-awareness may be opened in which case the opening quotation by Spinelli (1989) will be seen as woefully misinformed.

The intention behind the exercises that follow is to provide students with guidelines that might enable them to further their understanding of how *their* private events are a function of environmental influences. These exercises were designed to help them role play the perspective of "the other one." Details of the resulting self-awareness are not open to inspection by others. Yet, interestingly, it is through the judicious manipulation of appropriate contingencies that the skilled teacher, like the parent, embraces the problem of privacy, with the result that the process of self-observation is initiated.

Exercise 1: "W"-ing

This "W"-ing exercise explores issues concerned with the labeling of private events (Skinner, 1953, Chapter 17). The word "explore" is chosen deliberately because the exercise is designed to provoke questions in students rather than to supply them with answers. This is one way to avoid the trap of expecting students only to dutifully remember the conclusions reached by other scientists without these students ever having "participated in the quest" that inspired these conclusions. Quite often the fun in doing science is found in the search for answers rather than the answers themselves.

The exercise itself is simple and is similar to a relaxation training procedure. Students are encouraged to sit with their eyes closed and to observe the feelings associated with various parts of their body. At one point in the exercise they are given a new label for a particular feeling. Later they are asked to consider how it is that their parents were able to provide them with labels for a number of feelings when it is only they, the students, who have access to these feelings. The exercise concludes with a number of quotes taken from Capra (1975).

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Instructions

Read the following instructions *slowly* to the whole class.

1. Priming an appreciation of the contrast between "external" stimulus control and "internal" stimulus control.

In this exercise I want to explore the idea of "separateness." To start with, I would like you to consider the simple notion that your presence is part of my environment and that my presence is part of your environment.

As you each see me now, you can discern the edges of my being. You can see where my body begins and where it ends. To some extent, I appreciate your perspective of me because I perceive something similar when I look at each of you. However, when I close my eyes and look into the darkness I can no longer see any edges. Mind you, I can feel the semblance of edges that form parts of my body. From here, though, I don't fully appreciate the edges which you see in me.

Now I would like you close your eyes and to look for your own edges in the way that I have just done.

So close your eyes.

2. Stimulation of covert behavior.

Please keep your eyes closed until I tell you to open them.

In this session I will be asking you to concentrate on various parts of your body. Let's start with your feet.

I want you to concentrate on the *feeling* in your feet. Without moving your feet, I want you to concentrate on the tightness of your shoes around them. Now, if you can, I want you to give attention to the outline of the shoe around your foot.

Next, I want you to concentrate on your ankles.

Now the calves of your legs.

And now your knees.

Moving up a little higher, I want you to concentrate on your hips as they press against the seat of your chair.

I want you to feel the expanse of your back.

And now your shoulders.

I now want you to concentrate on your arms, and then your hands. Some of you have your hands on the desk, while some of you are supporting your head with your hands. I want you to feel the point of contact whichever way your hands are positioned.

Now, still keeping your eyes closed and without moving, I want you to concentrate on the feeling you have of a person beside you. Notice how it feels as if you are actively doing something. You can actually feel a change taking place

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on that side of your body. I'll give you a second or two until you have accurately localized this activity.

3. Tacting a feeling.

Now, I want to give this feeling a name. I want to call it "W." At this very moment, then, I can quite freely conclude that you are all "W"-ing [pronounced "double-you-ing"].

If I were to ask you if you knew what it means to "W," you would be able to answer affirmatively. So, again, to "W" is to persist in that which you are doing just now.

4. Using the "W" tact as a basis for stimulating further covert activity.

Now that you are able to "W" you can appreciate, perhaps, a small increase in awareness of yourself. Consider for a moment an interesting possibility that might follow from this. Wouldn't it be fascinating if our society could teach us to identify and label a host of experiences like this?

5. Making a link between newly-stimulated covert activity and previously-stimulated covert activity.

The funny thing is, it has already done so. I have just demonstrated this to you: foot; ankle; calves.... Can you feel them again?

6. Using recently learned behavior as a basis for stimulating "questioning behavior" and "imagining behavior."

There is an interesting problem here. I cannot feel what you are feeling, yet I taught you how to label a feeling to which only you have access. How was I able to do this?

7. Shaping "understanding behavior."

Keep your eyes closed.

When your eyes were open at the start of our exercise you were aware of our separateness. Now you are sensitive to the energy of my words as if they somehow reached inside of you and moved you around. You may also have noticed that those times in which you were moved around in a familiar way were the times when you would probably be inclined to use the word "understanding" to characterize this familiarity. In other words, "understand" is a word you use to describe something you do, much the same way that you now use "W." (cf. Morris, 1990; Schnaitter, 1987)

Imagine for a moment the difficulty you would have in explaining the nature of "W"-ing to someone. Imagine telling your friends that you "W"-ed today. It would be like using words to describe to an Eskimo what a banana tastes like. The *understanding* of "W"-ing comes from the *doing* of it.

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8. The skin does not separate you from the world, it unites you to it: An appreciation.

To close this session I want to return for a moment to the idea of separateness. I have here a few quotations from a book by Fritjof Capra called *The Tao of Physics*. In this book Capra relates the conclusions of some modern nuclear physicists with some conclusions reached by Eastern philosophers and mystics.

To help prepare you for these quotations, I would like you, still with your eyes closed, to focus on the space which separates our physical bodies.

Physicists now tell us that if the molecules which constitute this space are divided into atoms and these atoms are further divided, and so on, we reach a point when there is no separately existing matter.

Here is the first quotation:

When we divide some gross (or composite) matter, we can reduce it to atoms, But as the atom will also be subject to further division, all forms of material existence, whether gross or fine, are nothing but the shadow of particularisation and we cannot describe any degree of (absolute or independent) reality to them. (p. 292)

Here's another:

In ordinary life we are not aware of this unity of all things but divide the world into separate objects and events. This division is, of course, useful and necessary to cope with our everyday environment, but it is not a fundamental feature of reality. It is an abstraction devised by our discriminating and categorizing intellect. To believe that our abstract concepts of separate "thing" and "events" are realities of nature is an illusion, (p. 277)

And another:

The Buddhist does not believe in an independent or separately existing world into whose dynamic forces he could insert himself. The external world and his inner world are for him only two sides of the same fabric, in which the threads of all forces and of all events, of all forms of consciousness and of their objects, are woven into an inseparable net of endless, mutually conditioned relations, (p. 143)

9. Stimulation of post-session investigative behavior

I will leave you now with an interesting question. How separate are we really, and to what extent do we help to determine the nature of each other's consciousness?

You may open your eyes now.

Exercise 2: A Doorway to the Past and Future

In regard to publicly observable behavior, scientific measurement is a particular type of behavior of the scientist that is under discriminative control. Importantly, it involves relational responding (i.e., relating one measurement to another) and through it scientists have categories with which to work. In the case of private

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events, observers can also be trained to respond to different categories of events no matter how ineffable or fuzzy the edges of those categories. Skinner (1953) hinted at how this might be achieved when he said, "The environment, whether public or private, appears to remain undistinguished until the organism is forced to make a distinction" (p. 260).

Working from this directive, the objective of this exercise is to provide an opportunity for a contrast to emerge between an imagined reality and a currently experienced reality. Making opportunities for such a contrast to appear is one of the simplest ways of self-experimentation. Metaphorically speaking, the exercise is intended to function as a "mirror" for private behavior so that the behavior of predicting the future can be seen for what it is, i.e., an activity arising out of the dynamic interplay of current and historical contexts.

This practice is of special importance because talk of the future is embellished in a variety of ways in mentalistic analyses:

When you talk about verbal behavior you are inclined to engage in, it sounds as though you are talking about the future. Since future events cannot affect present behavior, people are tempted to invent a cause in the present—an inner purpose or meaning—and to insist that talk about the future proves the existence of mental images. (Baum, 1994, p. 116)

The importance of this issue can not be overemphasized. What is of concern, though, is how the arguments are usually presented to students. Reading about private events cannot have the same effect as being personally exposed to contingencies designed to teach their discrimination. If one expects that a well-rehearsed argument alone is sufficient to dismantle the effects of "belief in the effects of the future," then one will be surprised at the difficulties some students experience with this exercise. We should not forget that it takes quite a few years of reading and writing before those who write books can fully appreciate the arguments themselves.

Instructions

You are advised to practice this exercise several times at home before you try it with a class. The exercise should be conducted in a room that has its windows covered. During class select a few volunteers and then read the following instructions slowly to each of them. Avoid behavior-speak.

1. Initial relaxation and orientation.

The first thing that I want you to do is to close your eyes for about one minute and just relax.

Before you open your eyes I want you to concentrate on the feeling of your presence in this room. I want you to get a summary in your mind's eye of what it means to be you at this particular moment in time.

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2. Enhancement of contextual control.

Now that you have an image of your presence I want you to add to it by opening your eyes.

I want you to feel the impact of all of the physical objects that come into contact with your field of view. Concentrate on my presence; on the walls surrounding you; on the lighting in the room; on the presence of others. . . . I want you to concentrate, if you can, on the feeling you have of actually being *in* a room. That is, there is a world outside of here which for the moment is not accessible to you.

3. Stimulation of covert behavior (imagining the future).

We are now ready to proceed with the next step in this experiment. I want you to *imagine* what it feels like to be outside of this room. Try to create the *feeling* you would get if you were outside of this room. Imagine the feeling you would get if you were on the other side of the door.

4. Priming imagining behavior so that it persists until contact is made with a changed environment.

In a moment I will be asking you to actually leave the room and stand outside the door. Before you go, however, I would like you to pay close attention to my next instruction.

When you reach the other side of the door I want you to notice the contrast between your imagination of what it would feel like to be there and what it *actually* feels like. Also, as this new experience continues to grow I want you to notice how the intensity of your present experience gradually recedes until it is "just a memory." In other words, there will come a point when you notice your current experience is just a memory, like the memory you have now of what it feels like to be *outside* of this room.

5. Priming a potential new imagining behavior so that it persists until contact is made with a second change in the environment.

When you reach this point I want you to prepare yourself for the next stage of the experiment. I want you summarize the feeling you have as you stand there. Having done that I want you to imagine what it will feel like to be on the other side of the door.

When you are ready I want you to open the door and return. As you enter I want you to notice the contrast between what it actually feels like and what you thought it would feel like.

6. Summary of instructions.

Are you clear as to what you are to do? To summarize: first, I want you to pay attention to the "decrease" in the intensity of your current experience and the initial "increase" in the intensity of your new experience. Then, after you have adapted to the new experience I want you to return. As you return I want you to

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notice the initial "increase" in the intensity of the next new experience and the "decrease" in intensity of the feeling you got from being outside of the room.

7. Priming self-consciousness.

One final point. As you return, you may notice a special relationship between yourself and me. If you do feel this I would like you to consider the possibility that I know of something that is going on inside your head.

8. Send the students out of the room.

Send your volunteers out of the room one at a time and wait a few minutes after he or she returns before sending the next one. Do not allow a discussion to develop until everyone has gone through the exercise. It is advisable to work with a limited number of people (about three or four) in a session. When all volunteers have returned you can begin a class discussion. Below is a list of possible topics you could cover:

(a) Did anyone feel slightly "paranoid" or separate from the group as he or she returned to the room? (This only happens sometimes, more so with shy individuals.)

(b) Did everyone appreciate the contrast between their imagination of an experience and the actual experience itself?

(c) Imagination of an *in* or an *out* experience was only possible given a previous history with these or similar experiences.

(d) Emphasize the power of the environment to produce the changes which were experienced; without the *new* interaction with the environment there would have been no *new* experience of that environment.

(e) How many times a day do similar transitions between experiences occur without the attention that was given to them today? What would be the benefit of giving more attention to the ways in which we change in particular contexts?

(f) Talk to the class members who didn't participate in the experiment and draw attention to the power of verbal behavior to move human beings across space and time. Ask a volunteer to talk about his or her experience and then discuss the report while he or she is talking. This is one way of getting students to see that verbal reports are data to be analyzed.

(g) Draw attention to the variability in verbal reports from the volunteers in the experiment.

(h) Verbal reports are not effective in producing changes comparable to those produced by direct contact with the environment. To demonstrate this, start a discussion on the general notions of contingency-shaped and rule-governed behavior by asking your volunteers to communicate to the class the changes which occurred within them during the experiment. Other class members will not be able to fully appreciate the extent of these changes until they too are exposed to the combination of instructions *and* the change in the environment produced by walking through the door.

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(i) If you are working with an advanced class, discuss the problems posed by the study of private events.

(j) Since all behavior occurs in the "present," imagining the future can be seen as a particular type of private event, "Muring." Similarly, since talk of the past is an activity that occurs in the present, it can be seen as the private event of "pasting." This exercise provides an opportunity for discussing ways in which "futuring" and "pasting" may be related. It also serves as a useful introduction to other writings concerned with similar issues. Consider, for example, the following two quotations:

The essence of meditation is nowness. Whatever one tries to practice, is not aimed at achieving a higher state or at following some theory or ideal, but simply, without any object or ambition, trying to see what is here and now. One has to become aware of the present moment... (Trungpa, 1969, quoted in Brandon, 1990, p. 63)

Living in the here and now is behavior derived from the Zen experience. Guilt and anxiety are children of the past and future. To the extent that a person dwells upon the should-have-been or might-be of life at the expense of living life in the reality of the present, he suffers. (Keefe, 1975, quoted in Brandon, 1990, p. 63)

Conclusion

Although the public behavior of a person can be analyzed, predicted, and controlled without referencing associated private behavior, this does not in any way condemn private behavior as unworthy of investigation (cf. Hayes & Hayes, 1992). Alternatively, it may be simply that it is difficult to develop suitable teaching gambits to complement the existing philosophy of radical behaviorism. Wann (1964) noted these difficulties when he paraphrased Skinner's general approach to the problem of privacy:

The "boundary" for public-private is not the skin, but the line between the verbal community's being able to reinforce behavior differentially and its not being able to do so, or able to only with great difficulty, (p. 107)

Much of what Skinner wrote about the analysis of private events can be viewed as a commentary on the legacy of our childhood. The challenge to the teacher is to make his arguments persuasive. One way to do that is to take control of private events in the manner outlined here. To do so means continuing, in a sense, with the practices previously employed by our parents. The seriousness with which we adhere to the notion that self-knowledge is of social origin can be judged best by how we teach it.

Skinner (1990) said that one of his great aims in life was "to discover what it means to be a knower" (p. 103). Many students come to psychology on similar quests. It is hoped that exercises like the ones described here may function as establishing operations (Michael, 1993) that provoke self-experimentation by

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students (cf. Neuringer, 1984). After all, looking at it from a student's point of view, if they can be shown that an everyday activity like walking through a door presents a veritable gold mine of opportunities for exploration, they might be more intrigued by what our discipline has to offer. In conclusion, it is important to remember that the art of teaching behavior analysis involves more than the design of contingencies to enable students to remember the facts of behavior. It also involves an appreciation that the students we teach will be the ones who develop our discipline further:

You don't draw people into science by saying that science is the basis of technical innovation—which it is—because that's too remote when you are at school. But if you can say, these are the big questions we are asking and we are making progress, and you can help us to answer some of the questions, then you are making science come alive. (Efstathiou, 1993, p. 33)

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