

PETER HARZEM (1930–2008): A REVERENCE FOR LANGUAGE

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[It is] enough to explain why I am saddened, and often depressed, by what has been happening to “behaviorism”, to behavior science generally, since 1913. How far have we come back since then? Seems to me we may have slipped backwards. It looks to me sometimes, in my more depressed moments, like eighty years of no progress. —W. N. Schoenfeld (1993, p. 24)

Peter Harzem passed away after a long illness on May 26, 2008 in the company of his wife Anne at their home in Auburn, Alabama.

Born in Istanbul, Turkey, into a well-educated, middle-class family, Peter was raised in the context of two very different cultures. On one hand, he absorbed from his family life the melding of Mediterranean and Islamic traditions and wisdom. On the other hand, his university education exposed him to the rigor, thoughtfulness, and skepticism characteristic of British philosophy toward knowledge. Peter assimilated the best from each of these experiences, and his own way of conceiving psychology was deeply influenced by these two ways of life.

Even though Peter initially pursued operant psychology through his investigations of schedule-controlled behavior in animals, he very soon became concerned with theoretical and conceptual issues, as well as with language as the distinctive feature of human behavior. Peter was convinced that genuine scientific progress in psychology was not going to be the direct result of improved research and quantification methods, or of the accumulation of experimental data and observations. Quite to the contrary, systematic neglect of the importance of concepts by psychologists inevitably led to disordered “theorizing,” fragmentation, and confusion. In 1978, with T. R. Miles, Peter published the book *Conceptual Issues in Operant Psychology* based upon the writings of J. L. Austin, Gilbert Ryle, and Ludwig Wittgenstein and through which conceptual analysis was introduced to operant psychologists. In the conduct of behavior analysis empirical and conceptual issues are often confused, and to address this concern the book attempted to show the importance of “logical behaviour” of concepts to behavior analysts.

Harzem and Miles concentrated on three philosophical techniques helpful in clarifying conceptual and theoretical work in psychology. These techniques were (1) the polar principle, (2) the paradigm case, and (3) pointing out particular

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consequences implied by a statement that challenge correspondence with the speaker's intention. The polar principle has to do with the fact that concepts, insofar as they classify, also distinguish. When a term or expression involves the application of a concept in relation to events, things, or properties, the polar principle assumes that at the same time the concept excludes something as non-pertinent. For instance, if we lived in a monochromatic world, the word "color" would be senseless since nothing could be excluded as non-colored. The second technique considers how a concept is used in a so-called "paradigm case," that is, in a typical case in which it is correctly or appropriately employed. Terms and expressions derive their meaning from use in context. Psychological terms are no exception to this rule, and to ask what a given term means involves asking how it is used and under which circumstances. Psychological terms, to the extent that they are non-technical terms borrowed from ordinary language practices, do not have a unique meaning. Quite to the contrary, terms such as remembering, thinking, imagining, perceiving, and the like change their meaning according to the circumstance and context in which they are used or applied. Finally, the third technique highlighted in the book involves the use of expressions that overgeneralize some features or attributions. This would be the case when one asserts, for example, that "Our society is ill." If this statement were true and consequently applied to all members of this society, the question that follows is: For any X who lives in this society, is X ill?

While the use of these techniques is not sufficient to build adequate technical concepts or systematic theories, their applications are essential for alerting psychologists to the language traps involved in the loose employment and application of terms, especially when they are imported from ordinary language practices or from the technical jargons of other disciplines.

Peter was deeply concerned by "the mismatch between scientific research and application of findings to natural conditions" (2005, p. 92) in behavior analysis. He thought that this state of affairs was due to the fact that the units studied in experimental research do not exist as such in nature. Two different, but connected, problems are related to this issue. One is the assumption that terms related to behavioral episodes in ordinary language have a "natural" correspondence with these same terms in technical language of a scientific theory, as when the terms "reward" and "reinforcement" are used as if they were equivalent. Another problem is related to the external validity or empirical representativeness of the experimental preparations through which scientific knowledge about "behavior" is obtained.

Terms such as reward have been used since long ago as part of the practices involved in ordinary language; behavior science did not discover rewards. Reinforcement theory was developed as an attempt to systematically investigate the effects of rewards. However, even though most behavior analysts think that rewards, as identified in ordinary language, actually correspond to reinforcers, this seems to be, at best, an oversimplification. For example, most rewards do not seem to depend upon specific deprivation conditions. Quite the contrary, as in the case of money, satiation conditions may *increase* the search for larger amounts of the

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same reward. In other cases, rewards produce a generalized decrement on behavioral activities. Moreover, they may be best reflected in sustained *activities* where it is not possible or reasonable to distinguish the reward from the rewarded activity (e.g., reading poetry, playing a musical instrument, practicing a sport).

Reinforcement is studied experimentally under severely constrained conditions involving discrete, repetitive events which do not correspond to those environmental events that enter into relationships with behavior under natural conditions. In natural conditions and practical work, events have no clear boundaries, and the application of technical concepts related to reinforcement, operant responses, and discriminative stimuli do not seem to fit into the actual events taking place. Peter commented that

. . .as even a cursory examination of the literature of applied behavior analysis will show, the natural conditions have compelled the applied worker to apply the terms of behavior analysis to the phenomena he/she has to deal with, thus inadvertently creating a false impression that a science is applied. (2005, p. 93)

Peter thought that theory and research preparations must change in order to meet the issues and problems faced when dealing with behavioral phenomena under natural conditions—including many of those dismissed by behaviorists because of their “mentalistic” connotations. For example, the complexity of behavioral phenomena and related episodes is improperly approached by adding the tag “behavior” to concepts such as imagining, perceiving, thinking, marrying, drinking, eating, hating, and so on. Dispositional terms involve the occurrence of different types of behavior, but they should not be simplistically identified with any behavior in particular.

Peter thought that true progress in psychology could not be achieved if original sources of theoretical thinking and research were not known and consulted directly. Otherwise, psychologists are prone to dogma and narrow views about their subject matter. At the same time, they are exposed to indirect, distorted, or inaccurate versions and interpretations of significant historical contributions. Peter concentrated upon the case history of John B. Watson to demonstrate what he considered to be a shameful and common practice by psychologists in general—and by behavior analysts in particular.

Peter first discussed the issue in a symposium held in Guadalajara in August 1993 to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the publication of the *Behaviorist Manifesto* by John B. Watson in 1913. In the published version of this paper (1993) Peter reviewed “two different sorts of assault” (in his own words) upon John B. Watson: one on his private and professional life and the other on his ideas and the nature of his work and contributions. Peter highlighted contributions by Watson that have been ignored, misrepresented, distorted, or forgotten by psychologists—behaviorists included. A thorough inspection of Watson’s *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* (1919) clearly reveals the range and focus of his theoretical positions regarding the nature of psychology, the problems, scope, and methods of psychology (two chapters), human physiology (three chapters), emotions, instinct, bodily and psychological habits, language,

personality and its disturbances (six chapters), and a final chapter on the human at work. These issues and their treatment by Watson provide powerful contradictions to many unfounded but common criticisms regarding the postulation of “the empty organism,” the neglect of complex psychological functions, and not applying psychology to the service of mankind. Peter’s appraisal of Watson is clearly expressed in the following quote:

As it has been the case in other instances in the past, this time, too, the prospect of a significant contribution to our civilization was lost. Psychology took a turn away from the Objective Psychology of Watson, and correcting course is consuming too many decades and too many careers. Much remains to be learned from John Broadus Watson, if only the new psychologists and, indeed, all scientists of human conduct, could be persuaded to read him. I have no hope that they will. (1993, p. 64)

Peter committed himself to do a wide and deep investigation of Watson’s life and his thinking. He spent the last ten years of his life preparing a book on Watson. Unfortunately, he could not finish it.

I have commented only on some of Peter’s intellectual queries and contributions. Contrary to present values, Peter did not formulate any “law,” model, or theory, nor did he propose a paradigmatic task for investigating a set of phenomena. He never did (nor intended to do) a crucial experiment or developed complex quantitative methods to analyze behavior. Peter did none of these things—but for the correct reasons. He was persuaded, as many other psychologists should be, that the present state of contemporary psychology, including so-called behavior analysis, is unsatisfactory. The ignorance of the historical evolution of psychology, the dogmatic acceptance of “principles” of and interpretations about the behavior of individuals, and the resulting conceptual confusions prevailing among psychologists are not the appropriate bases for the development of a science of psychology. Peter was a wonderful human being who showed us through his intelligence, scholarship, wit, and honesty that psychology has a long way to go. All of us will miss him in this journey.

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