Commentary on Papers on Operantcy

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These four papers provide a useful beginning toward elucidating how operantcy is common to both Skinner's behavior analysis and Stephenson's Q methodology and how the two contribute to each other for optimal development. Delprato and Brown set forth the meaning of operantcy in both systems. They suggest that Stephenson's adoption of the operant played a role in his philosophy of science for subjectivity that avoided psychophysical dualism and physiological reductionism. After listing and elaborating on seven ways in which operants function in Q, the authors conclude that these bring "the conventionalist to new ground."

Conventional thinking is so much a part of our culture that mainstream psychology has never caught up with Stephenson and Skinner or those with closely related philosophies of science such as Kantor and Bentley. Even some of those who adhere to behavior analysis or Q methodology fail to comprehend and apply the philosophy that is integral with it. I pointed out an example of this inconsistency in a pair of authors' two-part paper in which they attributed mentalism to subjectivity and interpreted factor structures as representing a mind (Smith 2001). In the present group of papers, Lipgar indicates his use of Q methodology to objectively study operant behaviors, outcomes of Q sorts with a small number of subjects. But he also refers to "the effects of subjective psychological variables on behavior" and to quantitative factors as "empirical and quantified representations of subjective constructs." Under Stephenson's philosophy of science, subjectivity does not have an *effect* on behavior but *is* behavior, behavior that is in reciprocal operantcy with the environment. And subjectivity is not a constructed thing, but concrete behavior. It is the quantitative factors that are constructs for the subjective behaviors. The author concludes by stating, "subjective probability notions are found to reflect some core features of personality functioning." Subjectivity does not reflect personality but *is* personality (or a component of it). Personality consists of patterns of behavior, which include subjective behaviors. These small differences in words are important distinctions that express major differences in philosophy.

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Assumptions such as these are widespread in the professional literature. They arise because of the powerful indoctrination of our culture in which mind-body, subjective-objective, internal-external, brain-behavior, and similar dualisms are givens that pervade our lives from cradle to grave. Even our professional disciplines uncritically adopt them, sometimes by pairing a construct with the word "behavior:" cognition-behavior, personality-behavior, brain-behavior, subjectivity-behavior, mind-behavior, etc. Thus, a construct and an event are hitched together. More specifically, these dualisms arise because we fail to keep constructs and events distinct. But a simple procedure can help guard against this shortcoming. The first step in maintaining the distinction is to start our inquiry with the recognition that we are dealing with events consisting of behaviors or operations on the environment and, reciprocally, the environment on the individual, as in Q sorting, and not with hidden determiners. (As Delprato and Brown observe, Stephenson used "operant" at first to refer to sorting and then to factors.) The second is to draw our constructs such as measurements, theories, assumptions, inferences, and so forth directly from the events rather than from cultural sources. That is, as Midgley and Morris explain, they must be derived, not imposed. The third is to interpret our results in terms of the events we started with. If we do not impose cultural constructs in the first step, such as the assertion that we are dealing with a mind or internal representations, and remain consistent with those same events through the next two steps, we will be in accord with Stephenson, Skinner, and Kantor.

For example, in Brown's study of national identity in which he found factor scores of pride, shame, and apprehension he interpreted these as events involving, after Kantor, types of adjustment to specific conditions, that is, events. He did not impose cultural constructs such as internal representations. I would, however, offer a modification of Brown's quotation from Skinner in which the latter specifies feelings as "accompaniments" of behavior. Perhaps Skinner has unwittingly derived this from the linguistic habit in English of saying that people *have* feelings (although Skinner himself often analyzed word usage for its pernicious effects or for hidden meanings). A feeling is not something people have. It is what people do, what they are. Jean-Paul Sartre noted that when I feel sorrow I am sorrow. That is, I behave sorrowfully. Such feelings as pride, shame, and apprehension are not just tag-alongs to behavior. They are behaviors. We do not have pride and shame as accompaniments to behavior, but we are pride or shame; that is, we behave proudly or shamefully.

Although Stephenson was quite explicit about the objectivity of subjectivity and the primacy of behavior, those who use Q as a technique only might overlook his integrated philosophy and turn to mentalistic interpretations just as some applied behavior analysts have overlooked Skinner's scientific approach and given mentalistic interpretations to their

results. They have fallen into the cultural mode of imposing constructs rather than deriving them from events. For this reason the comparison by Midgley and Morris of some of the characteristics of the behaviorisms of Kantor, Skinner, and Stephenson is important. Their review of the ways in which Skinner treats what he calls public events and what he calls private events shows that he did not recognize the subjectivity of public events whereas Kantor delineated the different event fields in which all interactions are unique and specific by whatever name they are called. Skinner emphasized the locus of events and held that the inside of the skin is private and the outside is public. In contrast Kantor referred to functional relationships in which public versus private are obviated constructs. (Delprato and Brown note that Skinner did not deny subjectivity but had no way to measure such behaviors.) Stephenson adopted Kantor's system and regarded subjectivity as a point of view that is fully communicable by Q sorts. Hence, the notion of Cartesian privacy with its inaccessibility collapses as well as the inner-outer or mind-body distinction of which it is a derivative. In Stephenson's words "Behavior is neither mind nor body nor physiology: it is simply behavior, whether subjective to a person or objective to others" (1953, 23). I submit that researchers who gain a working knowledge of at least two of these three behaviorisms will less likely confuse cultural constructs with their data.

Skinner and Kantor — and I would argue more especially Kantor — provide support, justification, and a broader framework for Stephenson's philosophy of science. Because Skinner's philosophy and his operant methodology is event-based and Kantor's more thorough and systematic analysis of behaviors is likewise event-based, these two systems stand well positioned to support Stephenson's own event-based system; and Stephenson in turn provides a technology that contributes to behaviorism's effort to include all behavior in its domain. It enables subjectivity to be studied as concrete behaviors, as operations that yield information available in no other way. In so doing, it removes any remaining barriers from a rigorous investigation of subjectivity and any remaining assumptions that we are dealing with dualisms or something other than concrete behaviors. It gives behaviorism a pillar of support whose absence had left it sagging, which in turn contributed to the rise of cognitivism and its thoroughgoing mind-body dualism. Thus, Stephenson's Q methodology and its philosophy of science, consistent with that of Skinner and Kantor, supports their work just as their work supports his.

I started my comments by referring to only two parties, Skinner and Stephenson; for these are the authors of the two systems that use the term "operant." But a more extended look demonstrates, as the authors of these papers have shown, that three forms of behaviorism, despite some differences in terminology and emphasis, contribute to Q methodology and it to them.

The four papers make the case for the value these systems have for one another. For behavior analysis, interbehaviorism, and Q methodology all begin their inquiry with events and end it with constructs derived directly from the events, thereby joining each other in their naturalistic study of human behavior.

References

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