INTRODUCTION

THE ANOMALOUS SURVIVAL OF OPERANT PSYCHOLOGY

Skinner's program, unlike other behaviorist programs, has continued to develop unabatedly for the past forty years. (Lacey, 1979, p. 381)

The conventional wisdom of the 1970's was that during the previous decade psychology had undergone a revolution. The precise nature of this revolution was a matter of dispute, but the revolution itself was not. Some described it with concepts introduced by Thomas S. Kuhn (1970), suggesting there had been a "paradigm shift" from behaviorism to cognitive psychology (Leahey, 1980). Others argued that there had never been a behaviorist paradigm, but only a behaviorist methodology, and so there could not have been a paradigm shift, but only a decisive rejection of a failed methodology (Mackenzie, 1977). Still others suggested that Noam Chomsky's (1959) critical review of B. F. Skinner's (1957) Verbal Behavior had actually refuted behaviorism (Newmeyer, 1980), while others maintained that the story was more complicated than a straightforward case of refutation would allow (Lachman, Lachman, & Butterfield, 1979). No one however doubted that increasing numbers of psychologists ignored behaviorist strictures against reference to mental states and processes. Behaviorism, the dominant approach to psychology in America from roughly 1920 through 1950, seemed to be dead—or at least rapidly dying.
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There was, however, one striking exception to this trend. In 1954, when William Verplanck (1954) compared B. F. Skinner's operant theory with other learning theories of the day, he found it had "uncovered a wide new range of phenomena, involving variables not at all considered by others" (p. 302). In 1959--ironically, the very year in which Chomsky allegedly refuted behaviorism--the number of articles published by operant psychologists actually began to show a dramatic increase (Gilgen, 1982, pp. 97-98). During the following decade, as cognitive psychology rose to its current prominence, operant psychology was also experiencing rapid growth. This growth can be documented by almost any measure one might choose--number of research articles, expansion of professional organizations, or influence on the field as judged by peers (Gilgen, 1982). Operant theory, however, is usually seen as embodying an extreme form of behaviorism. Thus, if most behaviorist psychologies were dying, one was nonetheless emerging in full bloom.

At first, this was not widely noticed; but as the dust from the cognitive revolution settled, and historians began to sift through the rubble of behaviorist psychology, they discovered an operant program that was fully intact and showing no signs of collapse.\(^1\) Of necessity

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\(^1\)Catania (1973a, p. 434) seems to have been one of the few scholars to express serious doubts prior to the 1980's about there having been a cognitive revolution in psychology.

The nineteenth century closed with the promise of an integrated science of psychology (Tichener, 1898). In the twentieth century, that promise has yet to be fulfilled. Students of psychology still are asked to choose theoretical sides. They see functional accounts of operant behavior pitted against ethological accounts of behavioral structure, analyses of reinforcement contingencies pitted against theories of cognitive processing, and descriptions of language as verbal behavior pitted against psycholinguistic formulations of language competence. Behaviorism continues to clash with phenomenology, and empiricism with nativism. Psychologists are