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Behaviorism, Social Learning, and Cognitive Theories Reaction Paper

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RESPONSE 1: Freud and Learning

Sigmund Freud is rightly considered as one of the central figures in the evolution of modern psychology. I have been particularly drawn to Freud since the features and aspects of his learning theory find their reflection in almost all modern theories of behaviorism and social learning. Sigmund Freud always stressed the relevance of experiences, particularly childhood experiences, in the development of human personality. I fully agree with Freud that childhood experiences and childhood traumas leave deep traces on the individual psyche. Very often, it takes time to find the true cause of our emotional and psychological disturbances, and professional psychologists help uncover the hidden aspects of our childhood relationships with parents and the environment. At times, offenses, physical and emotional abuse, and even simple disagreements launch complex emotional mechanisms that keep guiding our behaviors over the entire lifespan. Therefore, as a person who seeks a better understanding of individual behaviors and personality, I often conclude that the main causes of individual misbehaviors and emotional/psychological problems can be found, while considering the most memorable (or, on the contrary, insignificant) events at various stages of personal development.

However, I do not except Freud's sexualization of individual behaviors, especially, during childhood. I also do not support Freud's position on abnormality. Freud's theory of social learning is based on the implicit assumption that most individuals have hidden or obvious mental problems, which stem from the sexual experiences gained during childhood. Also, I do not think that all psychological problems faced by adults are rooted in their childhood experiences. Personality is an ever-evolving construct, and experiences change every second. Freud has greatly contributed to the development of social learning theories, but his theory, which is based on the Victorian society's traditions, no longer fits in the contemporary conditions of life.

RESPONSE 2: Skinner and Conditioning

If Freud does not provide any satisfactory explanation to the development of human personality, then who does? In the world of psychology and social learning theories, B.F. Skinner is claimed to be one of the greatest contributors and most outstanding psychology scholars of his time. Like Freud, Skinner relies on the relevance of experiences in individual development and learning, although he manages to avoid the so-called “sexual” focus in his theoretical claims. In Skinner’s view, positive and negative experiences shape individual behaviors; they either reinforce similar behaviors in the future (if positive) or result in avoidance (if negative). For instance, when a person grasps a hot pot with his/her bare hands, the physical pain that results will, most probably, make him/her more cautious in the future. In the meantime, individuals’ academic successes in certain disciplines can make them more perseverant in studies.

Unfortunately, one of the greatest fallacies of Skinner’s theory is in his negligence towards the role of personality in social learning. We never know what exactly individuals learn from their behaviors, until we understand what drives them, how they react to their experiences, and what their main personality features are. I tend to rely on the assumption that personality is a strong mediator between individual experiences and actions or decisions. Numerous examples have shown that even the most negative experiences may not stop certain individuals from making another attempt. Failure to achieve the desired result at once may easily become a strong motivator, positive reinforcing power, to move towards the desired goal. The most obvious is the example of famous athletes, who have certainly experienced numerous failures and physical pain on their way to fame and glory. Others, after the initial failure, may forever give up their thoughts about certain kinds of activities. Nevertheless, even the absence of any reinforcement may play a role in the way individuals learn and develop new behaviors, and this is where I fully support Skinner.

RESPONSE 3: Little Albert

The story of Little Albert has become one of the most memorable and, simultaneously, controversial moments during this course. On the one hand, the Little Albert experiment has emphasized the aspects of human personality and psychology that had been previously unnoticeable. First, I need to say several words about the experiment itself. The experiment was organized by John B. Watson, a famous figure in the history of psychology, and Rosalie Raynor, a student. The goal of the experiment was to trace the impacts of classical conditioning on humans. The results had to support (or refute) the relevance of learned behaviors and experiences in individual learning. A nine-month-old child was exposed to a series of external stimuli, and his emotional and cognitive reactions were measured. The results showed that various external stimuli could condition emotional responses in humans; in most cases, the researchers generated the sense of fear in the small child.

On the other hand, the experiment itself and its results raise more questions than they can actually answer. First of all, the results of the experiment involving only one child cannot be considered reliable and valid. In such experiments, sampling bias is simply unavoidable. If one child displays conditioned reactions to certain stimuli, there is still no guarantee that another child, of the same age and with similar behavioral characteristics, will display similar responses. Second, the ethical side of the experiment has to be considered. I am convinced that the researchers had no right to expose the child to the stimuli that generated fear and similar negative reactions. Third, the study provides no information to confirm that the child was mentally and emotional healthy while participating in the experiment. The experimenters did not use any objective measures to rule out the biological and other emotional/cognitive influences on the child's behaviors. Conditioning is an essential cognitive and psychological mechanism, but the Little Albert experiment cannot serve a model for the future psychology research.

RESPONSE 4: Social Learning in Dollard and Miller

Dollard and Miller were among the first to try to translate social learning theories into behavioristic terms. The goal of such translation was obvious – to enable the development of feasible experimental designs that could be used in laboratory settings. Dollard and Miller’s theory includes many fundamental psychology concepts, but the most interesting, in my view, is their categorization of conflicts. Approach-avoidance, avoidance-avoidance, approach-approach, and double approach-avoidance were included in Dollard and Miller’s conflict chart. This categorization helps understand what exactly causes the conflict, what type of conflict it is, and how to deal with it.

Another strong benefit of this categorization is that, unlike the earlier theorists discussed in this paper, Dollard and Miller pay particular attention to the mediating role of personality. The level of this professional attention is still far from desirable, but they can no longer ignore the fact that the way individuals perceive and respond to various conflicts greatly depends on their personal characteristics. What seems inappropriate is that the theorists recommend keeping away from the situations that cause anxiety, instead of proposing mechanisms that would help to cope with it and overcome conflicts. The pace of life is accelerating, making anxiety and conflicts virtually unavoidable. Thus, it would be fair to say that Dollard and Miller make just the first step towards a better understanding of personality and learning. This categorization of conflicts can be readily used to identify the most desirable behavioral reactions, depending on the type of conflict, and overcome the major emotional difficulties facing individuals at various stages of learning.

RESPONSE 5: Rotter and the Role of Personality in Learning

In this study of theories of social learning, Rotter's theory has become one of the most interesting and influential. The main reason why I have grown so fond of Rotter's theory is because I believe in the strength of personality and individual characteristics and their powerful impacts on learning. I fully support Rotter in that, in order to explain individual behaviors and predict them, we must need to consider personality characteristics and expectancies. These personality characteristics mediate the complex relationship between individuals and their environment. Objectively, psychologists cannot focus on the environment alone, or emphasize individual behaviors with no regard to the environment in which they occur. Their key goal is to create a holistic picture of individuality, which incorporates and balances the most essential environmental and personal features/factors. Still, the most important is Rotter's vision of the person-environment interaction, which is mutual and continuous. I also view personality as a constantly evolving construct, and Rotter reflects and supports my assumptions.

One of the main benefits of Rotter's theory is that she does not try to divide the process of development and learning into any distinct periods. Unlike Freud or Skinner, Rotter does not believe that individual development stops after a certain phase. Simultaneously, Rotter totally ignores the potential impacts of various subconscious stimuli on individual learning and development. It seems that, in Rotter's view, personality is everything that can be easily observed. At the same time, the fact that Rotter perceives individuals are mostly optimistic cannot be ignored. It is good to see people as those, who seek to maximize their rewards rather than those, who simply want to avoid punishment. However, I would also say that, when it comes to personality and learning, no standards are universal. In the meantime, such "optimistic" position has the potential to produce the most positive learning

results for the individual and his/her environment.

RESPONSE 6: Mischel and Personality Changes

I am confident that no single theory of social learning is universal and perfect. However, some theories still reflect our beliefs and conceptions of personality more than others. When it comes to my personal observations and perceptions of individual learning, Rotter's and Mischel's theories look the most relevant. Unfortunately, when we speak about personality, which is a potent construct mediating the relationship between individuals and their environment, we often make a misleading assumption that the most relevant personality traits and, consequently, behavioral reactions, are likely to persist over time. That is, we consider personality as a complex set of stable behavioral characteristics, which predetermine the pace and direction of social learning. Yet, in reality, in the study of social learning, no personality construct can be considered as stable. Everything changes – individuality, personality, and the environment. Experiences greatly impact individual perceptions of the surrounding reality, and personality features vary greatly across situations. The strongest side of Mischel's theory is that it depicts personality as a sophisticated system of numerous concepts and processes, which are both conscious and unconscious and manifest in different ways, depending on the situation. All these variables and constructs need to be considered, in order to create a more objective picture of the social and cognitive development in individuals.

Based on everything we have learned about learning, the process of social learning and cognitive development is far from being understood. Psychologists have made a great progress towards understanding the nature

and variables of social learning. Still, most probably, no one will ever be able to explain the process of learning in its entirety. Times are changing, and so are psychologists' perceptions of individuals and the environment. The future will give rise to the new concepts of personality development and learning in the postmodern age.