

Humanistic behaviorism may provide the necessary bridge between behaviorism and humanism. It uses the same experimental methods as radical behaviorism and builds on behaviorism's research on the effects of reinforcement. But it is basically concerned with human social and interpersonal behavior.

Classical behaviorism concentrates on analyzing the observable conditions that control behavior. Instead of trying to identify how motives and conflicts affect behavior, behaviorists look at previous conditioning with unconditional stimuli or a past reinforcement schedule as the controlling factor in behavior. Freedom is only an illusion since all of us are controlled by antecedents and consequences of our behaviors.

Humanists, on the other hand, stress the "self"—the person's subjective, internal experiences, self-concept, and personal interpretation of events. This subjective view of the world is the most influential force in our lives—"We are what we make of ourselves." But critics say humanism describes, rather than explains, human nature.

Humanistic behaviorism's synthesis is based on several postulates:

—Human beings are active thinkers; their thoughts about themselves and their world affect how they interact with the world.

—Human beings organize their experiences, ask questions, and find answers to explain what goes on in the world.

—Human beings are influenced by and have an influence on their environment. The individual's personality structure (including cognition), behavior (including skills), and his or her environment interact continuously.

—Human cognition, perception, and emotion can be studied and understood in terms of how they occur, their antecedent conditions, and consequences.

—Empirical evidence should be the primary source for finding ways to increase human self-efficacy.

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Bridging Humanism and Behaviorism



Humanistic
behaviorism uses
behavior modification
to reach humanistic goals.

All educators are concerned about students' well-being, and many like to consider themselves humanists. But to be a humanist takes far more than just having positive regard and goodwill toward the well-being of others. In light of the above postulates, perhaps the most humanistic approach to teaching is to learn how certain changes will help students and how this change can be accomplished.

Insoluble problems and inescapable traumas teach us to be helpless. Yet it is not the lack of rewards, but the noncontingency of rewards to our actions, that erodes our subjective belief in personal control. When rewards and punishments in life happen independently of our behavior, we eventually believe that our actions are futile; we stop trying to obtain rewards or avoid punishment.

Human beings may possess an innate motive to affect the environment, by striving for competence, resisting compulsion, or avoiding helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Humanistic behaviorism echoes humanism's tenet that self-actualization is an innate human potential. However,

it also insists that empirical evidence and accountable methods foster this innate potential. Indeed, "goodwill towards all" alone may not be sufficient to bring about humane and efficacious interactions.

We all feel sorry for Johnny who can't read. If Johnny is convinced he can't read because of the school environment and because of insensitive teachers, Johnny may never read. To deprive Johnny of his share of responsibility for his own learning is to deprive him of his sense of personal competence, which renders him helpless in his quest for learning. This may actually be the most inhumane act of all.

Humanistic behaviorism holds that, while we are controlled by environmental contingencies, those contingencies are often of our own making. Thus, humanistic behaviorism can return to us our share of the responsibility for our own destinies. ■

Reference

Seligman, M. E. *Helplessness: On Depression, Development and Death*. San Francisco: Freeman and Company, 1975.

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