

Psychology teachers who call themselves humanists teach the same way as those who call themselves behaviorists.

# HUMANISM — AND — BEHAVIORISM: *Is There Really a Difference?*

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Educators for years have debated the meaning of the terms "humanism" and "behaviorism" and their conversion into classroom practices (Combs, Popham, and Hosford, 1977). Amid the controversy, some individuals have spelled out major differences between humanism and behaviorism (Hitt, 1969; Kolesnik, 1975; Alonza, LaCagnina, and Olsen, 1977), while others have argued the compatibility of these approaches within the same instructional settings (Avila and Purkey, 1972).

Wide differences of opinion also exist within each of the competing perspectives. As Smith (1978) points out, Skinner and Bandura are very different behaviorists, just as Allport, Combs, Maslow, and Perls present remarkably dissimilar versions of humanism. These differences might lead us to suggest that the respective

camp first reach agreement among themselves before trying to convert others to their favorite perspective.

Educators have not been alone in their efforts to reconcile the perceived differences between these two apparently dichotomous positions. For nearly three decades, members of the American Psychological Association have argued whether high school psychology courses are or should be humanistic or behavioristic in content and orientation. They have not agreed whether the courses should emphasize the "hard sciences," indicative of the behavioristic approach, or "life adjustment" and "mental hygiene," considered to reflect the humanistic perspective (Engle, 1967).

In spite of this confusion, teachers have little difficulty in identifying their own approaches with one of these two labels (Stahl and Casteel, 1973, 1975), yet, until recently (Stahl, 1976, 1977a, 1977b), there was no information to reflect the degree to which these labels realistically described classroom activities. Although much had been assumed about their classroom practices, little was known about the exact nature of the teachers, their courses, or their backgrounds.

Data collected from three separate surveys of Florida and Mississippi public and private schools (Stahl, 1978) indicated that in practice there existed no real difference between humanistic and behavioristic psychology teachers in a number of factors, including:

- the objectives they established
- the topics and content they included
- the topics and content they thought should be included
- the teaching methods they used
- the type, size, and location of the schools in which they offered their courses
- the number of semester credit hours in psychology they earned in college
- the level of their perceived adequacy for teaching their courses.

As these findings reveal, the patterns of responses of humanistic and behavioristic teachers from Florida and Mississippi (and later from Illinois) were identical. In each state, individual teachers varied more widely from members of their own group than they differed as a group from one another. On the basis of these "from the trenches" responses, we conclude that the labels "humanism" and "behaviorism" have *no functional value* in distinguishing these groups of teachers or their courses from one another. Furthermore, it seems that these labels should not (and must not) be used to automatically infer that any specific methodology, objectives, contents, background, or instructional approach can be associated solely with either label, or to assume that real differences exist between humanistic and behavioristic teachers in their classrooms.

Although these two groups of teachers from three states were nearly identical, they were not necessarily equal in their abilities to meet the needs of their students. This is, after all, the most important area where real differences could be expected to exist.

Subsequently, we studied responses from 1,215 Florida, 724 Mississippi, and 1,137 Illinois students who were enrolled in pre-college psychology courses taught by these teachers. The students indicated

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why they had enrolled in the course, the content they wanted taught, and the methods and instructional aids they wanted their teachers to use. Based on correlational analysis, these students, from three different states, were not different from one another in the four areas studied. Coefficients between student responses equalled or exceeded the .86 level ( $p < .01$ ) on every set of variables where they were compared. The fact that students in three such seemingly diverse states had exactly the same reasons for signing up for psychology, wanted the same content covered, and so on, was surprising.

Even more surprising, when the responses of the students were compared to the responses of the humanistic and behavioristic teachers in their respective states, *neither group* of teachers was closer to meeting the students' needs as specified by the students themselves (Stahl, 1978). In each state and along each variable, the results clearly demonstrated no significant differences in the two groups of teachers in meeting the needs of students.

Thus, contrary to expectations, these data also indicate there is no real difference between humanistic and behavioristic teachers in the degree to which:

— their course objectives compare to the reasons why students enroll in their courses

— their courses actually include the topics and content their students want and desire to see included

— their own beliefs about the content and topics their courses should contain compared to the content desires of their students

— their own beliefs about the types of instructional materials they would like to have available for use in their courses compared to the types of instructional aids their students would like to see them use.

One implication can be drawn from these repeated findings. Just as "you can't judge a book by its cover," it seems evident that "you can't infer details about a course by the label its teacher attaches to it!" While there is no available data related to teachers in other subject matter areas and grade levels, it appears that if psychology teachers are unable to distinguish between humanism and behaviorism, teachers in other areas are

equally likely to have an unclear distinction between the two approaches.

We contend that classroom teachers have not articulated a clearly defined framework for distinguishing between humanistic and behavioristic principals, practices, procedures, or methods. We suggest that this same inference can be applied to those who train teachers. We conclude that teachers "do their own thing" so to speak, and seek labels they find most comfortable or believe their school administrators will accept. Teachers may have adopted the jargon from their teacher education programs without mastering the prerequisite skills needed to put them into practice. Even more likely is the possibility—as some of us have long contended—that in reality, there's not a dime's worth of difference between "humanism" and "behaviorism" as practiced by teachers; that the two approaches are not dichotomous but complementary.

For those who had expected real differences to exist between humanistic and behavioristic teachers and/or their courses, these findings may be a disappointment. Whether we examine school settings, class characteristics, course content, objectives, methodologies, or teacher preparation, the outcome is the same. Humanistic and behavioristic teachers are made up of the same types of individuals who teach basically the same kind of course.

If we are to make sound decisions affecting the future of curriculum and instructional practices, we must not hide behind labels that now appear to be dysfunctional. We should avoid another alternative—that of seeking yet one more set of convenient labels on which to hang our faith and hopes.

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