

ON BEHAVIOR...
THE BEST LAID PLANS OF DOGS, RATS, AND MEN
By Rober DePaolo
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Cues, contingencies...“structure”...these are words we’ve lived by for the past umpteen years in stumbling our way to various behavior management strategies for students in the public schools. The concept began in the early 20th century when, in his attempt to map the human brain, Ivan Pavlov decided its topography consisted of singular pathways that hooked up roughly like the old telephone systems. The maxim back then was that behavior was a function of associations and/or consequences emanating from the environment.

Though he was the forerunner of the behaviorist movement and, although his brand of behaviorism was more simplistic than the ‘operant’ school that came later, even Pavlov began to question his own thesis toward the end of his career. Unless one was conversant with Russian Psychology, this might have gone unnoticed—especially since a few years after he won the Nobel prize, the Bolsheviks took over and limited the amount of information that came and went.

Had the world been more connected back then, behavior management might have taken a different course, all because of a research project—not nearly as well known as the one involving the bell and the salivating dog, but ever bit as meaningful.

In this late-in-life initiative, Pavlov placed a dog in a cage and issued a verbal command for him to exit. Following that, one of the two conditioned stimuli came on. It was either a buzzer (in which case walking across the cage would lead to a nasty shock), or a tone (which was supposed to be the “safety signal”). Pavlov figured if the dog learned to differentiate between the two, he would know when to respond to the command and when not to. According to the prevailing learning theory, this should have been a piece of cake.

Unfortunately the dog threw in a monkey wrench—he refused to come out regardless. They switched tones, buzzers, tried playing Tchaikovsky—and still nothing. That is until the dog’s caretaker—the one who fed and provided him with attention—came along. Then the sight of the caretaker inspired the dog to leave the cage.

God bless him. Even the empiricist, Pavlov chose to give this a scientific name. He called it “the effect of person,” but he knew it wasn’t part of the classical conditioning paradigm. He had to conclude this darn dog had himself a schema! The animal evaluated the bend he had with the caretaker and used the data-unfriendly concept of *trust*, rather than consequences or associations to guide his behavior.

Following that, and once again within the clandestine information climate that was the USSR, a group of Pavlov's disciples started working on this interpretive process under the rubric of 'semantic conditioning.' It culminated in studies on human behavior indicating that we rely heavily on what they called a "second signal system" (i.e. language and affective appraisals) and much less on the environment than was presumed.

Had that been known in broader circles, cognitive, behavioral, and affective psychology might have been fused into a unified theory of behavior, analogous to Einstein's Unified Field Theory in physics. All of us would have been taught in grad school that there is no essential difference between Pavlov and Piaget, and that behavior management (and perhaps teaching in general) are not about structure, nor strictly about information. They are guided by the learner's interpretation—that unless we reach the "I" we don't reach the kid. We would have known that by saying "good job!" to a student has no impact unless he chooses to interpret the compliment as something he needs and respects. That means the *source* of the feedback becomes as important as its mechanics of schedule of delivery. That in turn leads to a more modern, post-Skinnerian maxim (still psychologists) that the larger the brain, the more social the animal, and the more reliant he is on imitation, language, interaction, and perceived nurturance to find his behavioral bearings.

Had Skinner not come along and demonstrated to the world that pigeons, rats and other small brained, experientially-deprived creatures could be taught to run mazes and play ping pong, behavior management methods might look quite differently today. Yet he did come along, and in a time of working parents with frenetic life styles and less time for kids, a quick solution to inappropriate behavior had its appeal. That doesn't mean it was the right way or that it couldn't evolve into something newer and better. And the fact is, we're still using the language of the 1940s when it comes to behavior management.

If we're honest about it, that's why typical behavior management programs seldom work other than in an extraordinarily controlled environment or unless a relationship or two is thrown into the mix. Maybe that's why there is always one teacher at the parent conference who will say: "Gee, I don't have any problem with him in *my* class." Now that's what I call a primate!

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