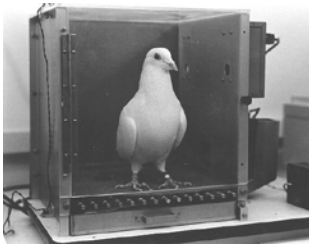


## Psychology on a Page 4: Behaviourism



My department of psychology was, in 1966, like many others, in the grip of the influence of Behaviourism (Watson & Skinner) and Learning Theory (Hull). Today, the legacy of these years is that *empiricism* holds sway over any other kind of proof or theoretical heuristic.

Behaviourism has at its centre a beguiling and attractive idea: 'what if we could estimate and calibrate the actions and reactions of human beings in response to events or stimuli by purely experimental means?'

This would remove the suspect influence of speculation about the mind, the psyche and the role of mental states, which are essentially impossible to observe without the report of the person experiencing them. We would be freed of the unscientific and subject only to the results of experiment.

Hundreds of conditioning and learning trials later, the behaviourists had formulated the famous S>R model, shown in the diagram below:

S<sub>timulus</sub> > R<sub>esponse</sub> > R<sub>eward</sub>

The key idea here is that those responses which reward by the satisfaction of some drive or appetite would be strengthened, while those that did not would gradually fade or extinguish. In the early days this practice of conditioning behaviour using reward was known as Operant Conditioning.

In other words: positive chains of events that lead to reward are likely to be sought after while negative or unrewarded sequences are not. Kind of obvious but the behaviourists believed it could be expanded to calibrate all behaviour once you knew the Stimulus and Response.

You can immediately see the attractiveness of this idea to people who wish to sell a product or service. If we could link the product with a state of reward or reinforcement then surely this would increase sales? For many years nearly every commercial for just about anything used this S>R>R model to 'train' the customer to buy the product and expect the reward – even if that was only freedom from undesirable or negative experiences.

Very quickly, right from the early days of commercial TV, advertisers were using these theories in a clever way. The most famous of these was perhaps the 'Problem>Solution'



## **Psychology on a Page 4: Behaviourism**

pattern of many commercials. Here the advertiser sets up a Stimulus that reflects discomfort or problems and solves it with a Response featuring his product or service, leading to a Reward for the viewer who, hopefully, can identify with the events in the commercial from h/her own experience.

Nowadays, the reward business has become something of a science of its own, based on those early behaviourist experiments. Loyalty cards, interest free loans (reduction of punishment), BOGOF (Buy One Get One Free) and Frequent Flyer Miles are all examples of Reward schemes – that can be modeled by their owners to maximize spending and loyalty from their customers.

