

Bringing Behaviour Back In “Why a behavioural perspective is needed to provide theories of action with a theory of agency”

Colin Campbell

University of York. United States

ABSTRACT

It is noted that sociology is commonly described as a discipline that studies ‘action’ as opposed to ‘behaviour’. However it is argued that this position is untenable given that ‘action’ is itself a form of behaviour, and hence that a ‘behavioural’ perspective needs to be incorporated into an action or interpretivist paradigm. Two common objections to such a proposal are then considered: first that ‘behaviour’ is too insignificant a portion of human conduct to be of concern to sociologists, and second that behavioural and action theory perspectives are incommensurate. The latter claim embracing the related assumptions that a behavioural analysis of human conduct ‘from the outside’ is incompatible with an ‘interpretivist’ analysis ‘from the inside’, and that an understanding of conduct in terms of stimulus-response is incompatible with one that presumes actors to be free agents. It is then demonstrated that neither claim is tenable given that actors are also self-observers while voluntarism does not preclude action being understood as a response to a stimulus. The paper ends with a plea for sociologists to recognise that a behavioural perspective supplies just that theory of agency that is missing from most theories of action and that in restoring it they would be implementing Weber’s recipe for a discipline that seeks to gain an “interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects”.

Keywords: behaviour, action, agency, behaviourism, interpretive analysis

INTRODUCTION

Does the study of behaviour¹ have any place in the discipline of sociology? A reading of sociology textbooks would suggest not; for sociology is commonly presented as not simply a discipline that rejects behaviourism but also as one that does not study behaviour. Thus Lee and Newby, in their textbook, feel that it is important ‘to stress that sociology is concerned with the study of social action *alone*. *Other forms of behaviour - for example, reflex behaviour - are not the proper object of sociological analysis*’ (1983:174; italics added.) While more succinctly, if no less categorically, David Silverman has claimed that ‘Sociology is concerned with understanding action rather than with observing behaviour’ (1970:126). This then would seem to be the prevailing orthodoxy, to wit that ‘action’ and ‘behaviour’ are to be regarded as two contrasting forms of human conduct and that while sociologists study ‘action’, others, presumably psychologists (albeit of a certain theoretical persuasion) are the ones who study ‘behaviour’. A first glance this might seem an acceptable division of labour. But there is a problem. This is the simple fact that these two categories do not exclude each other. ‘Action’ is not a separate and distinct form of human conduct, one that can be set over and against ‘behaviour’. It may differ significantly from respondent behaviour, if less so from conditioned forms, but it remains a form of behaviour none the less, something that Weber’s classic definition suggests with its claim that ‘action’ should be regarded as ‘all human *behaviour* when and in so far as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it’ (1964: 88; italics added.) What this strongly suggests is that ‘action’ should not be regarded as ‘behaviour’ that has been transformed, through some magical alchemy, into a different phenomenon altogether, but that it is simply a distinctive form of behaviour, and as such retains the basic

characteristics of all behaviour. What is more, the assumption of a simple division of labour in which sociologists study 'action', while the non-sociological 'behaviourists' study 'behaviour' leaves sociologists with the obvious problem of a very circumscribed subject-matter. For while the behaviourists can claim (rightly or wrongly) that their paradigm encompasses all of human conduct, sociologists who consider their subject-matter to be limited to the study of 'action' are forced to admit that theirs does not embrace all of human conduct, omitting as it does whatever falls under the heading of 'behaviour'. Clearly it would be preferable if sociologists could include the study of behaviour alongside the study of action and therefore not merely expand the scope of their discipline but also deepen and extend the study of action itself. However, if this is to happen, then sociologists must find a way of accommodating, if not integrating, the study of behaviour into their existing paradigms.

Sociology and Behaviourism

The study of behaviour has not always been excluded from sociology. Indeed there have been some sociologists, such as G. A. Lundberg (1964), R. Emerson (1972) and George C. Homans (1974), who were prepared to call themselves 'behaviourists', while this self-description was also employed by members of the Chicago School, more especially by Dewey and Mead, with the latter consistently describing himself as a 'social behaviorist'. Indeed, there are those who have advocated a distinct perspective called 'behavioural sociology' (see Burgess and Bushell 1969; Molm 1981), which is one that clearly does not see the study of behaviour as excluded from the discipline. But then a good case can also be made in support of the claim that behaviourism continues to be a significant element in many schools of sociology to this day. The most obvious candidate here is symbolic interactionism, where Mead's style of behaviourism, although down-played by later interactionists, still exerts an influence. But then, as both Homans (1987) and Turner (1988) have argued, both utilitarian economics and rational choice theory can also legitimately be regarded as behaviourist in their fundamental orientations, with Jonathan Turner also suggesting that this is true of modern exchange theory, Marxism and critical theory (1988). However, despite this, if behaviourism is mentioned at all in contemporary sociology textbooks, it is most likely to be simply in order to dismiss it, with the result that any 'sociological significance' that it may be deemed to possess is said to be because it 'it conflicts with basic sociological assumptions about human behaviour' (Johnson 2000:26). A statement that rather suggests behaviourism's usefulness is merely that of a negative reference point, enabling sociology to be presented as a discipline that is 'not behaviourism'.

Now it is understandable that some sociologists should reject behaviourism. For this is a tradition of inquiry that has been as concerned with studying animal as human behaviour, while traditionally denying that consciousness has any relevance to the understanding of human conduct, and has consequently concentrated on studying only observable behaviour. This position, as developed by the likes of Thorndike, Pavlov, Watson and Skinner, emerged as a reaction against introspection, and consequently tended to treat consciousness and mental states as epiphenomena, preferring to study observable behaviour since this was apparently measurable and hence open to 'scientific' inquiry.ⁱⁱ Regarded in this light it is un-surprising that the interpretive and action theory traditions within sociology should be represented as involving the rejection of behaviourism, given that these perspectives typically take as their subject-matter precisely those very features of human life that behaviourism itself rejects.ⁱⁱⁱ However it is hard to see quite why this should lead, in turn, to a rejection of the study of behaviour. The assumption that appears to justify this conclusion is that since action is not behaviour and sociologists are deemed to be those people who study the former there is therefore no need for them to concern themselves with the latter. In this way a behaviourist indifference to action is matched by a sociological indifference to behaviour. Yet, as stated

above, the two positions are not equivalent. All sociologists are justified in rejecting is behaviourism's dismissal of the concept of action. For while behaviourists may refuse to recognise the reality of the phenomenon of action, sociologists can hardly argue that behaviour does not exist. Indeed, it is hard to see how they can escape conceding that behaviour, in addition to action, needs to be studied, even if they do decline to undertake the task themselves. Consequently while behaviourism cannot by definition involve the study of something called 'action', it does not logically follow that sociologists who study action cannot, in addition, study behaviour.

Behaviour as Insignificant

One possible explanation for the sociological neglect of behaviour is that while recognising that behaviour is a legitimate object of study many sociologists may consider that it is one that they can safely ignore. For they might argue that although sociology does not necessarily imply a rejection of behaviourism, that category of conduct falling under the heading of behaviour is essentially trivial and hence has so little bearing on action that it can quite reasonably be ignored. This argument appears more than plausible given that the legitimate subject-matter of behaviourism is typically represented as being limited to the study of reflex actions. Indeed it has become common practice among sociologists to cite simple reflex movements (such as blinking, or the knee jerk) as examples of that category of conduct covered by the term 'behaviour'. However by consistently using examples of simple respondent behaviours in this way and then contrasting them with examples of complex, purposeful and meaningful conduct - designated 'action' - sociologists necessarily give the impression that behaviour refers to only a small, as well as an essentially trivial, proportion of all human conduct. However it is unjustifiable to limit the concept of behaviour to its simple respondent form. For, although sociologists rarely mention it, there is an operant as well as a respondent form of behaviour, and this operant or learnt form not only constitutes a considerable part of human conduct as a whole but is not obviously equatable with action as that term is conventionally understood. Consequently the representation of behaviourism as exclusively, or even predominantly, concerned with reflex responses is deeply misleading.

Indeed, even from the perspective of sociology itself this limitation of behaviour to reflex actions, with the accompanying suggestion that everything else humans do is accompanied by subjective meaning, is unjustified. It is worth quoting Weber at this point. For he not only defined behaviour as action "when and *in so far as* the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it" (1964: 88; italics added), but went on to observe that, as far as the categories of behaviour and action are concerned, "*a very considerable part of all sociologically relevant behaviour is marginal between the two*" (1964:90; italics added); comments that hardly suggest that the proportion of human conduct lacking subjective meaning is small, or limited to reflex responses. On the contrary they suggest that the two categories should really be considered as ideal types and that human conduct is typically hybrid in form, comprising part behaviour and part action.

Accepting the truth of this statement suggests that sociologists should not only reject the idea that behaviour refers to a small and trivial portion of human conduct. They should also abandon their tendency to adopt a simple binary mode of thinking, whereby items of conduct are either judged to be reflexes or full-blown actions, and recognize instead that the reality is rather more complex, with much human conduct being effectively 'mixed' in character; that is, possessing some of the characteristics of the ideal-type of behaviour and some of ideal-type of action. Looked at from an interpretive or action theory perspective this hybrid category is best identified with that form of conduct conventionally known as habit (although Weber tended to

use the term 'tradition'). That is to say, with those items of conduct that manifest intentionality and are in most cases performed voluntarily (to this extent they conform to ideal-type action), but that, on the other hand, individuals typically undertake without any prior planning, deliberation or, in most cases, monitoring (and to this extent resemble the automatic and involuntary responses characteristic of the ideal-type of behaviour).^{iv}

There is however an even more powerful argument in favour of regarding behaviour as an important phenomenon for sociologists to study in addition to the observation that most conduct is of a hybrid form and hence has a behavioural ingredient in addition to its actional qualities. This is the fact that action is itself a form of behaviour. This simple truth is all too often forgotten by sociologists. However the fact that ideal-typical action possesses qualities not present in simple respondent behaviours - qualities such as rationality, voluntarism and reflection - this does not mean that it ceases to be behaviour. All it means is that it should be treated as a special category or class of behaviour; one that may indeed require different methods of study, but not one that can simply be excluded altogether from the general overall heading of 'behaviour'. Indeed, it is important sociologists recognise that although action may be contrasted with simple behaviour, strictly speaking the true opposite of behaviour is not action but complete inactivity, such as may characterise unconsciousness or death. In that sense all the relevant categories of human conduct should be thought of as varieties of behaviour: these being respondent behaviour, conditioned (or learnt) behaviour, and action-behaviour.

These self-evident truths are routinely obscured by the common practice of contrasting action with behaviour as a whole, when it should be contrasted just with its simple or respondent forms, making it clear - as Weber does - that action is itself a form of behaviour. Unfortunately, few contemporary sociologists take the trouble to do this, although earlier generations usually did. Thus Ludwig von Mises, one of the founders of action theory, defined action as a form of behaviour. He writes that 'human action is purposeful behavior' (1949:11), while David Martin also defines action as 'purposeful behaviour' (1970:6). Classic definitions like these that make it clear that action is a type of behaviour do not create any problems. These derive from those, more contemporary, definitions that set out to represent action as 'not behaviour'. The crucial point here is the inclusion of a suitable qualifying adverb; thus those definitions that make it clear that action is not *merely* behaviour, or not *simply* behaviour, are accurate and not misleading. Unfortunately, all too often the qualifying adverb is missing, with the result that action is presented as if it were not a form of behaviour. Recognising that action is a form of behaviour makes it impossible for sociologists to argue that behaviour is a trivial, insignificant form of conduct not worthy of their attention.

One final reason why behaviour cannot be treated by sociologists as a marginal phenomenon, of little relevance to the study of action, is that the two categories of conduct are not immutable. Individual items of conduct are not fixed forever as either respondent, conditioned or action-behaviour, but can change their status over time, either from less to more simple forms, or in the reverse direction. This should be obvious enough, as biographically all action has developed out of more 'primitive' forms of behaviour (just as all conditioned behaviour has developed out of respondent behaviour). But then it is also the case that an action-behaviour may 'degenerate' back into a primitive form at any time. If therefore sociologists are serious in their efforts to understand human action, and consequently embrace diachronic as well as a synchronic forms of analysis, they can hardly escape the necessity of studying the relationship between action and the other categories of behaviour.

Incommensurate Perspectives

However even if sociologists were willing to acknowledge that behaviour is far from being a trivial component of people's everyday conduct it is still more than likely that the majority would argue against the adoption of a behavioural perspective. The grounds for this rejection being the widespread assumption that the premises embodied in the latter, as well as the methods typically employed, are so at odds with those that guide the study of action that the two perspectives could not possibly be combined. In other words, the claim is that the two theoretical perspectives, or more particularly the epistemological assumptions that underpin them, are so different that they effectively exclude each other. This would certainly seem to be Alan Johnson's position, as noted above, while it is fairly usual to encounter behaviourism and action theory described as 'incompatible' or 'mutually exclusive' perspectives or paradigms (see, for example, Harre and Secord, 1972:29; and Burrell and Morgan 1979:25). But then crucially, this claim of a basic opposition between the two is frequently supported by means of a very particular argument. This is the suggestion that precisely the same item of human activity can legitimately be the object of study by either paradigm.

The importance of this argument is that it appears to suggest that social and human scientists have to make an a priori commitment to one or other of the two paradigms; that they are in effect required to choose between them. As long as it is possible to believe that the choice of paradigm is dictated by the nature of the phenomenon under investigation then no such choice need be made. On the contrary, the careful investigator would ensure that it was the nature of the phenomenon that dictated the choice, such that items of behaviour would be studied employing a behavioural paradigm and items of action an action one; thereby leaving open the possibility of an integration, or least a reconciliation, of the two approaches. However, if it is indeed the case that any one item of conduct can be examined - with equal justification - from either perspective, then any such a necessary link is broken and the possibility of any integration lost. So, how convincing is this claim?

What is usually suggested is that 'the same movements', may be either behaviour or action depending simply on the framework of analysis that is applied. Thus 'the same' movements of the muscles round the eye may be judged to constitute either a blink or a wink depending on whether a behaviourist or an actionist paradigm is applied. Similarly, 'the same' movements of the finger against the side of the nose may be either 'making a bid at an auction' or 'scratching an itch', depending again on whether an action or a behaviourist paradigm is applied (see Cuff and Payne 1981:118; Brandstadter 1984:116; and Doyal and Harris 1986: 53-4). Although in some cases the writers who cite these examples merely seek to illustrate the difference between the two paradigms, some also appear to assume they are demonstrating that whether an item of conduct is deemed to be behaviour or action is not dependent on any quality intrinsic to the conduct itself but derives solely from the framework of analysis which is applied. In this they are unsuccessful. For there is little evidence to suggest that such genuinely ambiguous events actually exist in reality; that is, ones that can be dubbed either behaviour or action with equal justification. Certainly the fact that, on occasion, people may make mistakes in their identification of items of conduct is not evidence for such a contention. Indeed, as Giddens (1976:73) has noted, there are not two alternative and 'equally correct' modes of describing behaviour. An item of conduct is either a blink or a wink, either a bid or a scratch, and the fact that some observers may have mistaken the one for the other does not imply that human or social scientists are free to apply whichever mode they fancy. On the contrary, they have an obligation to establish whether the behaviour in question was a willed action or an involuntary (or automatic) response to stimuli and so label it correctly.

There is however a more important point. The assumption contained in the above cited examples is that the items of behaviour identified as 'the same' are indeed behaviourally identical, only being distinguishable by the presence or absence of a mental component; that is to say, one known to the acting subject but invisible to an observer. Consequently it is only action theorists in their capacity as 'interpretivists' who are in a position to claim that such acts are indeed different as behaviourists, with their commitment to studying only that which is observable, would be unable to distinguish one from the other. Yet such an assumption is unwarranted, for it is simply not true that items of conduct performed with self-conscious intention are behaviourally identical with those that are performed instinctively or involuntarily, even if, to the casual observer, this may sometimes appear to be the case. In reality willed behaviour, that is action, differs from respondent and conditioned forms in its physiological as well as its mental characteristics. For action is not merely behaviour plus a mental component; it is a different form of behaviour. Thus the voluntary eye-blink or wink 'differs both in form and latency from the involuntary conditioned blink' (Kimble and Perlmutter 1970:363) as well as involving different parts of the brain. This clearly suggests that the two forms of conduct are indeed distinguishable by an observer - at least in principle - without the need to ask the subject. Hence there is no justification, even from a behaviourist perspective, for judging these to be examples of identical items of conduct, nor for failing to recognise actions as a special class of behaviours.^v Hence the suggestion that the 'same' item of conduct can be studied with equal justification from either paradigm is untrue. For what it is suggested constitutes 'the same item', turns out, under closer scrutiny, to be quite different. Hence there are not two different ways of looking at the same phenomenon; only two different ways of looking at different phenomenon. Respondent behaviour and willed action are two different forms of human conduct; and they remain different whether viewed from a behaviourist or an action paradigm. There is therefore no justification for sociologists to dismiss behaviourism on the grounds that it is intrinsically unable to distinguish action from behaviour

The Actor as Self-Observer

It is now time to turn to the question of how behavioural insights might be integrated into an action theory framework and the main obstacles here would appear to be first that the former takes the standpoint of the observer while the latter adopts that of the acting subject, and second, behaviourism assumes that human conduct should be understood as consisting of responses to stimuli while actionism treats the person as an autonomous conscious agent purposively directing his or her own conduct.

We can start by observing that although behaviourism is typified by the adoption of an observer's standpoint, while the sociologist (or more properly the interpretivist or action-theorist), being concerned to elicit the subjective meaning, characteristically adopts the actor's frame of reference, this choice - given that some conduct consists of respondent or operant behaviour - does not always exist. In this respect, as already noted, the two positions are not symmetrical. For although the behaviourist can adopt the role of scientific observer with respect to all aspects of human behaviour, the sociological interpretivist or action-theorist can only adopt the actor's frame of reference when the conduct concerned does indeed possess meaning. When it comes to behaviour that lacks subjective meaning, the latter option no longer exists. Clearly in these instances the sociologist really has little alternative but to adopt the stance of an observer.

This observation offers the possibility of a degree of integration, suggesting an approach that might offer some reconciliation between the two perspectives. Because it is not just the sociologist who is forced to study behaviour 'from the outside' as it were, rather than via the

actor's subjective understanding; this is also the perspective that actors themselves must adopt. Sociologists, by generally failing to acknowledge the significance of non-action behaviour in human conduct, have tended to avoid confronting the question of how actors regard their own behaviour. Focusing exclusively on meaningful action they have not asked themselves what attitude actors take toward their own 'meaningless' conduct. The answer, of course, is that actors are also necessarily observers of their own conduct; especially of that portion that of it that 'happens to them' rather than the portion they 'do'. Acknowledging the truth of this observation leads to the intriguing realisation that, in this instance, adopting the actor's frame of reference is essentially the same thing as adopting an observer's frame of reference. Or, rather, one is in effect adopting the one through the medium of the other, via the actor's role as self-observer. This suggests the possibility of moving some way toward accommodating a behaviourist stance into an action framework by adopting the actor's stance as an observer of his or her own conduct.^{vi}

To stress that the actor must also be a self-observer is not to re-iterate claims about 'taking the role of the other', still less is it to imply the relevance of such concepts as introspection or reflexivity. It is simply to observe that when it comes to behaviour - whether in the form of respondent or conditioned responses - the behavior has no option but to observe and understand these actions in roughly the same manner as would any bystander or experimental psychologist; the simple fact being that although he or she is the performer of the behaviours in question this confers no privileged or special insight concerning precisely 'what is happening'. From the perspective of the actor such events are of an 'environmental' character; that is to say, they have the status of being 'out there' and hence can only be studied as if they were separate from the actor as agent. Of course, this is not to suggest that actors necessarily adopt the same degree of scientific detachment that might characterise the behaviourist; it is simply to suggest that the character of their approach is fundamentally the same.

To illustrate this point we can take as an example the phenomenon of 'the sneeze', one of that category of simple reflex actions that sociologists typically refer to when illustrating behaviourism. This is an unintentional and involuntary behavioural response that, having no subjective meaning, cannot be judged to count as 'an action'. Consequently when it comes to understanding sneezing the individuals who are subject to it are no better placed than are any observers of the event. If, therefore, someone sneezes several times in succession both the sneezer and any observers of the sneezing are equally well placed to interpret it, and, if possible, grasp its significance; if indeed it has any. Say, for example, by forming the hypothesis that the sufferer is developing a cold.^{vii} Having said this, in practice individuals are more likely to be continually engaged in this process of monitoring their own behaviour and drawing inferences from it than are most observers. Unless, that is, their role is one, like that of a nurse in a hospital or the mother of a young child, which carries with it a clear obligation to monitor and interpret someone else's behavioural 'condition'. The reason why individuals engage in this monitoring is not egoism or self-concern; it is simply that the scrutinizing one's own behaviour is usually a necessary condition for the successful performance of most actions.

Indeed, there is an excellent reason why actors need to be engaged in a continual process of self-observation or the monitoring of their own respondent and conditioned behaviour, as opposed that is to simply reflecting on their actions; for unless they do, they will not know what they are doing. It may well be a central presumption of action theory that actors do indeed know what they are 'doing'. Indeed in the interpretive tradition generally it tends to be the case by definition that actors are doing what they know themselves to be doing. But this cannot be taken as given as far as their behaviour is concerned. Since behaviour is something

that 'happens to us', rather than something we 'do', it follows that we can only discover the nature of our behaviour through a process of careful self-observation. Indeed actors frequently discover that they are 'doing' things that they did not know they were doing, or alternatively become aware of events and processes in their body that they did not intend or desire. Thus one may 'discover' oneself scratching an itch or twiddling one's hair, or 'discover' that you have just spoken aloud, or that you are too tired to stand up, or that you need to go to the bathroom, or are too full to eat any more. As these examples illustrate, an observer orientation toward their own bodies - in the sense of a continual monitoring of self-states and self-behaviour - is an essential part of the repertoire of skills required of all actors.

Naturally individuals do not simply observe their own behaviour, they also strive to understand it, and in so doing they reveal a remarkable propensity for behaviourist-style explanations. That is to say, individuals often adopt a behaviourist position vis-a-vis their own conduct, offering causal explanations of their behaviour. Consequently whether or not sociologists acknowledge the relevance of behaviourism to an understanding of human behaviour it is important that they recognise that the individuals they study commonly do. This is to say no more than that individuals commonly draw upon assumptions about the importance of environmental influences and the role of stimuli in accounting for the things they 'do'. For example, individuals may account for their mistakes by observing that they 'were too tired' to get it right, or note that they jumped back out of the way 'instinctively', or excuse their failure to climb any further up the mountain by observing that they 'lacked the effort'; or alternatively, they will attribute their renewed energy to continue a task to the 'stimulus' provided by the hot coffee and its constituent caffeine. All of which is to say no more than that individuals recognise only too well that they are organisms and, just like all living things, are subject to the dynamic influences exerted on them by a wide variety of internal and external stimuli.

However unlike behaviourists ordinary individuals are motivated to understand their behaviour by something more than mere scientific curiosity. They need this knowledge if they are to be successful in achieving their goals. The fact that as far as behaviour is concerned all individuals are necessarily self-observers, noting the way in which they respond to stimuli and taking this into account when formulating or monitoring their action-plans, has largely been overlooked by action theorist, even though it is clearly critical to the successful performance of all action. Strangely, action theorists, although quick to see the importance of accurate, 'scientific' knowledge for the performance of successful 'rational' action, seem to have presumed that this was largely a matter of being well-informed about the environment in which the action was to take place; discussion of the norms governing the choice of means to attain desired ends or goals being generally couched in these terms. Or, if the competence and ability of the actor is recognised as entering into the equation, then this matter is typically assumed to be dealt with under such headings as 'socialisation' or 'pattern-maintenance and tension-management'. The truth, however, is that self-observation, in the form of a continual monitoring of one's own behaviour, is a necessary condition of the successful performance of any action. It is in that respect a key prerequisite of the power of agency. Thus, it is not simply in relation to their respondent and conditioned behaviour that individuals typically take on the role of self-observer. They also need to do the same in relation to their action-behaviour. For the fact that what the individual is 'doing' is being done consciously, voluntarily, attentively and with a distinct purpose in mind, does not mean that self-observation is no longer necessary. On the contrary, the behavioural features of the action engaged in still need to be monitored in this way. Consequently an observer perspective on conduct is an integral feature of the actor's frame of reference and should therefore also be part of the sociologist's. It follows that if the action-sociologist or interpretivist genuinely seeks to 'understand' the actions of

individuals then the information he or she needs to elicit from the subject will include material derived from self-observation as well as introspection and reflexive consideration. In that respect the old debate over whether human conduct is best understood 'from without' (i.e. through observation), or 'from within' (i.e. through eliciting the subject's understanding) fails to recognise that whilst 'from without' cannot include 'from within' the reverse is not necessarily the case.

Action as a Response to a Stimulus

It is now time to move on the second of the major differences between behaviourism and action theory, the fact that the former asserts that human conduct should be understood as consisting of responses to stimuli, consequently laying stress upon association and conditioning, while the voluntaristic action theory model tends to stress meaning, and in particular goals and the rational choice of means to achieve these goals, thus presenting the person as an agent consciously and purposively directing his or her own conduct. Since it is often assumed that these two models are in direct conflict with each other it is important to note that there is in fact no *logical* conflict between them. One reason why this is the case is that they actually address different aspects of conduct. Most self-designated action theories, for example, despite their name, do not actually have much to say about the accomplishment of action. Indeed the majority are theories of choice or decision-making (see Campbell 1996). However to identify the intention or intentions embodied in an act, the goals toward which it is directed, or the reasons why that act was selected from possible alternatives, still leaves open the question of how the act itself was initiated and carried through; which is to say no more than that most theories of action fail to include a theory of agency. And it is precisely this lacuna that a behaviourist perspective is able to fill. For by contrast with theories that concern themselves exclusively with 'meaning' behaviourist accounts directly address the question of the forces that enable acts to occur, whilst generally not addressing such questions as why alternative but equally possible actions were not performed, or in what way meaning was involved. In other words, the interpretive mode of analysis tends to address the question of why that particular action was performed rather than any other, whereas the behaviourist mode tends to address the question of how it was (that is to say through what dynamic processes) the action in question came to be accomplished.^{viii}

What this difference between the two modes of analysis strongly suggests is that there is no good reason why an act cannot be regarded as both a means to an end and a response to a stimulus, even if the reverse is not always the case. Because to claim that an action is a response to a stimulus does not necessarily mean that the actor had no control over its occurrence. Indeed 'action' is best conceived of as behaviour with meaning added; not as behaviour in which meaning has been substituted for a response to a stimulus. The problem here, as indicated above, is the consistent equation of behaviourism with respondent or reflex actions and hence the consequent assumption that, if an act is assumed to be a response to stimuli then it must also be involuntary. Yet there is no reason why willed actions cannot also be regarded as responses to stimuli.

The self-evident truth of this assertion can be illustrated by considering the simple, if not paradigmatic, case of control over the bladder and defecation. There is no doubt that in all animals urination and defecation are reflex responses to physiological stimuli, while human beings start life, as most animals continue theirs, responding involuntarily and immediately to these stimuli. However, as babies become toddlers the process of toilet training begins and, when eventually successful, children can be said to have acquired control over these responses, such that they now only urinate and defecate when and where they will these acts to occur.

However, the acquisition of voluntary control does not mean that these acts are no longer responses to stimuli. On the contrary, they remain, as they always were, responses to certain internal physiological processes that involve the actor becoming aware of distinct stimuli. All that has changed is that the actor has gained an ability to delay the response, such that it does not immediately and automatically follow the onset of the stimuli. Consequently willed action in this case is still a response to stimuli; it is simply that it is a controlled, and hence a delayed, one.

This example indicates that individuals often have a degree of choice over when they respond to stimuli. But at the same time the capacity to exercise this choice also implies the existence of a capacity to decide which stimuli to respond to. For human beings are bombarded by a range of stimuli at all times. As it is impossible to respond to all of them there is a process of selection involved. Babies, as well as animals, generally allow this process to be decided by a kind of natural selection in which the stronger stimuli win out over the weaker. Adults however, by virtue of having gained a degree of control over the automaticity of their inherited responses, can generally choose which stimuli will win this competition, at least in the short term. This is achieved by exercising the will, usually through a process of diverting attention away from the stimuli that are to be ignored and toward those that they wish to respond to.

It should be clear from the above that, instead of presenting responses to stimuli as a form of conduct fundamentally opposed to willed action, all actions should be seen as, in effect, *merely responses that the actor consciously decides to allow to happen*. It is interesting in this context that Ludwig von Mises, although rightly renowned as an action theorist, described action as 'the ego's meaningful response to stimuli and to the conditions of its environment' (1949:11). However some sociologists may still feel that even if it is accepted that adults have the capacity both to delay their responses to stimuli and to select which stimuli to respond to, this perspective remains one that still presents the environment, rather than the individual, as the primary initiating agent, or 'cause' of conduct. In order to counter this impression it is necessary to go one step further and note that in the case of human beings what is referred to as 'the environment' - that is, the source of the stimuli that they experience - is not a fixed and unalterable given, outside of their control, but that, on the contrary, individuals have considerable power to modify and alter this environment and thereby the stimuli they experience. Thus if the S-R model of human behaviour carries with it strong implications of environmental determinism, then we must note that, in the case of humans at least, the environment that individual actors inhabit is one over which they typically have considerable control. Thus, just to take a few examples, we may close the window to shut out that distracting noise; or possibly open it, and turn down the heating, in order to stop ourselves sweating. Similarly, we may take pills to eliminate our sea-sickness, put on sun-glasses to prevent having to screw up our eyes, wear extra layers of clothing in order to stop ourselves shivering from the cold, or hold our nose so that the strong stench does not make us sick. In each of these cases the respondent behaviours involved (turning toward a loud noise, sweating, being sea-sick, closing our eyes against a bright light and shivering, the overpowering smell making us sick) are all direct and involuntary reactions to environmental stimuli. Individuals can, however, block their operation by the simple device of modifying the environment.^{ix}

But of far more importance than the simple fact that humans have a degree of control over their environment in this way is the fact that the original behaviourist claim that people respond to stimuli requires modification in one vital respect. Generally speaking, individuals do not respond to stimuli, but rather to *the meaning* of stimuli. The reason why, in Pavlov's original experiments, the dogs came to salivate when the bell was rung was because the bell had previously been associated with food. In other words this particular sound-stimulus had

come to 'mean' food to the dogs. The same, of course, is true of human beings, except that they have the power purposely to create their own associations or 'meanings'. Thus while it is still true that all human beings will jump involuntarily if startled by a loud noise, if that noise is a bell, then this sound may 'mean' different things to those who hear it, and hence produce rather different responses. For example, if this is a fire-alarm then it may produce fear and panic; alternatively, if it signals the end of school-lessons for the day it may produce celebration and delight.^x

Finally it is important to note that cognitions, that is to say, ideas or thoughts, can also serve as stimuli producing behavioural responses. There is no good reason why it should be assumed that a stimulus cannot be a mental event any more than it must originate outside the organism concerned. As Cautela expresses it, 'stimuli presented in imagination have similar functional relationships to covert and overt behaviour as do stimuli presented externally.' (1971:111). This means, not only that an actor's 'environment' should be considered to include the content of consciousness, but also that describing conduct as the outcome of conscious control is quite consistent with claiming that it is a response to a stimulus.

We have reached the point of being able to see that in viewing the conduct of individuals as responses to stimuli we are not adopting a position that necessarily rules out either voluntarism or the understanding of conduct in terms of its meaning for the actors concerned. For, once we accept that individuals respond to the meaning of stimuli, whilst accepting that human beings are themselves the principal source of that meaning (and also, very often of the stimuli themselves), then we have come a good way toward an integrated position; one that effectively brings a stimuli-response model into line with a meaningful-agency model of human conduct. What this discussion clearly demonstrates is that a behaviourist, observer-based, stimulus-response view of human conduct, far from being at odds with an actor-based, interpretive one, is a critical part of such a model, and the way in which the two can perhaps best be integrated is by recognising that actors are themselves lay behaviourists.

They are behaviourists for the simple reason that they have to understand their own behaviour, and they do this by drawing upon a body of knowledge that is itself derived from observations of humans and animals going back many thousands of years. Pavlov may have gained his understanding of the process of conditioning through a series of experiments on dogs conducted in the 1920s, but shepherds have been controlling the behaviour of their dogs through a common-sense understanding of the same processes for generations. As Homans observes, the behaviourists' 'law of effect' has been known to mankind 'intuitively' throughout history (1987:55). But then individuals have also long recognised that they too are animals and hence that this law also applies to them. Consequently there is a kind of 'folk-law behaviourism' embodied in the common-sense knowledge that individuals use to guide and control their own actions. For example, that counting sheep may aid the onset of sleep, or that concentrating one's gaze on the horizon helps to avoid sea-sickness. These rough and ready rules of thumb reveal a basic knowledge of human behaviour - that is the way the body reacts to different stimuli - as well as ways of coping with or eliminating unwanted responses. Indeed, it is the very application of this knowledge, gained through a behaviourist understanding, that is critical in enabling individuals to engage in voluntaristic action.

§The simple truth is that actors know only too well that their conduct consists of responses to stimuli. Or rather, their behaviour reveals that they understand this 'law' well enough to employ it constantly in the control of their own conduct, even if they are not able to articulate it using the terms that would satisfy the professional behaviourist. However they do not make

the mistake, so common among sociologists, of assuming that its widespread applicability implies that human conduct is not voluntaristic. On the contrary, they understand that action is merely behaviour that is allowed to happen. If therefore the acting subject's world-view incorporates behaviourist assumptions how can interpretivists - committed as they are to being true to the subjective world-view of the actor - avoid incorporating these self-same assumptions into their theories?

CONCLUSION

The complete and unqualified rejection of behaviourism that currently characterises much of sociology is unjustified, and sociologists should cease presenting their disciplinary perspective as fundamentally opposed to behavioural-style analysis. Instead they should distinguish clearly between the legitimate refutation of behaviourism's dismissal of interpretive forms of analysis, and the rejection of behaviourism *per se*. The fact that behaviourists reject a view of human conduct that is fundamental to sociology is not in itself a good enough reason for sociologists to reject behaviourism, and certainly not a good enough reason to ignore the study of behaviour. For not only is simple behaviour - that is conduct that lacks subjective meaning - a real and not insignificant part of all human conduct, but that form of meaningful action that is of primary concern to sociologists is itself also a form of behaviour. Finally, when one adds to these observations the fact that much human conduct comprises a complex mixture of both simple and meaningful forms, whilst an analysis of the dynamic relationship between the two is probably the key to an understanding of individual human conduct in general, then it is clear that sociologists must make room for the study of behaviour within their discipline.

The truth is that interpretive, action-theory style perspectives have been over-applied, with reflective models of human conduct - that is, ones that present human beings as deliberative, purposive, reflective individuals - frequently being extended to cover conduct that is clearly unreflective. One is tempted to observe that such schemas have been employed unreflectively, as if all human activity was necessarily of this kind. For, as Camic has noted, those who use these models 'rarely provide a reasoned defence, or even an explicit justification, for their practice of uniformly casting human conduct into this one mould' (1986:1041). It is as if sociologists have over-reacted to behaviourism, using their stereotyped representation of that perspective as a means of justifying the adoption of an equally extreme position of their own. For just as radical behaviourists made physiological responses all there is to study in human beings, so many sociologists have responded by making reflective conduct all that they study. Both positions are, of course, equally absurd. As Don Mixon represents them, the one explains conduct in terms of the person as object responding to the push and pull of forces exerted by the environment, while the other explains it in terms of the person acting as agent directing their own behaviour. That is 'One camp seems to believe that we can do anything we choose to do, the other that we cannot choose to do anything. Both notions violate common sense and everyday experience' (1984:169). Or, as Mischel & Mischel represent the consequences of such an extreme polarisation of positions: 'To present causal powers either for the person or the environment exclusively ... seems to guarantee incomplete explanations and assures an exercise in futility' (1977:57).

Consequently sociologists need to recognise that all human conduct consists of behaviour and, as such, is subject to behaviourist laws. This is true of action-behaviour no less than of the respondent and operant forms. In this basic sense all conduct can be said to constitute responses to stimuli. Recognising this truth does not mean, however, that sociologists must abandon *verstehen* or cease investigating the role of meaning in conduct, still less that they must assume that individuals are not capable of voluntary, willed action. For a response to a stimulus can also be a deliberately chosen means to an end, just as actors may adopt an

observer perspective when viewing their own conduct. Nor is there any good reason why sociologists should continue to contrast interpretive understanding with causal explanation, as if these two modes of inquiry were irreconcilable. Indeed they would do well to remind themselves that Weber's definition of their discipline referred to "the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects" (1964:88).

Footnotes

¹ Sadly the term 'behaviour' is not used in a standard fashion within sociology. Sometimes it actually appears in definitions of the discipline's subject-matter (e.g. 'the study of human social behaviour' www.thefreedictionary.com). This is clearly a very loose usage of the kind that embraces both action and behaviour as they are conventionally understood. Where the terms 'action' and 'behaviour' appear together however, as is often the case with entries in sociology dictionaries or encyclopaedias or in introductory discussions in textbooks, one can be fairly certain that the meaning is much more circumscribed; indeed in this context it is far more likely that the term refers to that which is *not* considered to be the subject-matter of the discipline.

² If the rise of behaviourism in the 1920s and 1930s can be said to have caused psychology to have 'lost its mind', then it 'found it' again in the 1960s and 1970s following the 'cognitive revolution' in the discipline (Dember 1974). This movement, in part a reaction against behaviourism, was influenced by phenomenological and action theory perspectives. However, in one respect it is little more than an extension of behaviourism, one that recognises mental events (i.e. cognitive events), yet treats these more as items of behaviour than manifestations of consciousness.

³ Paul Lazarsfeld has observed that, as a consequence of the influence of Dilthey, there existed in Germany a tradition that assumed that 'some kind of 'action-language'' is mandatory for the discussion of the human sciences (1972:83). It would seem that, in contemporary British sociology, a similar assumption prevails.

⁴ One unfortunate consequence of the dominance of behaviour-action binary mode of thinking favoured by sociologists is that these hybrid forms of conduct - and habit in particular - have tended to remain overlooked and unstudied (see Camic 1986).

⁵ This is true even if one ignores the arguments in favour of treating mental events as 'behaviour', something that even Skinner was prepared to consider seriously (see Skinner 1968:242).

⁶ It is true that actors may also have access to data concerning their behaviour not available to observers; or at least, not available to the casual observer. These data relate to the monitoring of what are predominantly internal processes. Thus events and processes that are all too apparent to the actor, such as indigestion, cramp or migraine, may be difficult for an observer to detect. However this really makes little difference to the argument since in these cases, just as much as those where the behaviour is overtly discernible, the individual has no choice but to adopt the stance of an observer.

⁷ Porpora (1983:130) notes that Schutz uses this very example to criticise Weber's definition of action, saying that merely because an actor 'attaches subjective meaning' to a behaviour like a sneeze this does not make it an action. But then a sneeze would not qualify as an action in Weber's terms anyway because it is not a voluntary act. In addition, 'attaching a meaning' to an event like a sneeze is equivalent to interpreting a natural event occurring in the environment. Hence there is no way that the meaning it was given could sensibly be described as 'subjective' as it was neither motivated nor selected as a means to a goal.

⁸ This issue is usually referred to as the 'reasons as causes debate.' The position adopted here, as can be seen, is that the debate is largely spurious given that reasons logically relate to decisions rather than actions; hence while a reason may serve as a 'selector' determining which act is undertaken, only motives can be the causes of actions.

⁹ Psychologists called activities like these 'stimulus control' (Kanfer and Philips 1970).

¹⁰ That there is a process of interpretation between stimulus and response was a central part of George Herbert Mead's theory of action (see Baldwin 1988:145). Hence the stress placed by symbolic interactionists on the fact that individuals do not react to each other's actions but rather 'interpret' or 'define' the actions of others before reacting. However this is, of course, just as true when individuals interact with their environment.

References

- Abercrombie, N., Hill, S. and Turner, B. S., (2006), 'Behaviourism' q.v., *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology 5th Ed.*, London: Penguin Books.
- Atkinson, P., (1988) 'Ethnomethodology: A Critical Review', *Annual Review of Sociology* 14: 441-65.
- Baldwin, J.W., (1988), 'Mead's Solution to the problem of Agency' *Sociological Inquiry* 58 (2) 139-62.
- Brandstadter, J., (1984) 'Action Development and Development through Action' in Chapman, M., (ed.), 'Intentional Action as a Paradigm for Developmental Psychology: A Symposium', *Human Development* 27:113-44.
- Burgess, R.L. and Bushell, D. Jr., (eds.) (1969), *Behavioral Sociology: The Experimental Analysis of Social Process*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Burrell, G. and Morgan, G., (1979), *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis: The Elements of the Sociology Corporate Life*, London: Heinemann.
- Camic, C. (1986), 'The Matter of Habit', *American Journal of Sociology* 91:1039-87.
- Campbell, C., (1996), *The Myth of Social Action*, Cambridge: CUP.
- Cautela, J.R., (1971), 'Covert Conditioning' pp. 112-128 in Jacobs, A. and Sachs, L.B. (eds), *The Psychology of Private Events: Perspectives on Covert Response Systems*, NY: Academic Press.
- Cuff, E. C. and Payne, G.C.F., (1981), (eds) *Perspectives in Sociology*, London: Allen & Unwin.
- Dember, W.N., (1974), 'Motivation and the Cognitive Revolution', *American Psychologist* 17:161-8.
- Doyal, L. and Harris, R., (1986), *Empiricism, Explanation and Rationality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Durkheim, E., (1964), *Rules of the Sociological Method*, NY: Free Press.
- Emerson, R., (1989), 'Exchange Theory Part II, Exchange Relations and Networks' pp. 58-87 in *Sociological Theories in Progress Vol 2* Berger, J., Zelditch M. and Anderson, B. (eds.), Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage.
- Giddens, A., (1976), *New Rules of Sociological Method*, London: Hutchinson.
- Harre, R. and Secord, P. F., (1972), *The Explanation of Social Behaviour*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Homans, G.C., (1974), *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, NY: Harcourt Brace.
- Homans, G.C., (1987), 'Behaviourism and After' pp. 58-81 in Giddens, A. and Turner, J. (eds.) *Social Theory Today*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Johnson, A.G., (2000), 'behaviourism' q.v. in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology: A User's Guide to Sociological Language*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kanfer, F. H. and Philips, J. S., (1970), *Learning Foundations of Behavior Therapy*, NY: Wiley.
- Kimble, G. and Perlmutter, L.C., (1970), 'The Problem of Volition' *Psychological Review* 7:361-84.
- Lazarsfeld, P.F., (1972), 'Historical Notes on the Empirical Study of Action: An Intellectual Odyssey' pp. 50-100 in Lazarsfeld, P.F., *Qualitative Analysis: Historical and Critical Essays*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Lee, D. and Newby, H., (1983), *The Problem of Sociology: An Introduction to the Discipline* London: Hutchinson.
- Lundberg, G. A., (1964), *Foundations of Sociology*, NY: David McKay.
- Mann, M., (1983), *The Macmillan Student Encyclopaedia of Sociology*, London: Macmillan. Martin, D., (ed.), (1970), *50 Key Words in Sociology*, London: Lutterworth.
- Martindale, D., (1999), *The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory*, London: Routledge.
- Mischel, W. and Mischel, H.N., (1977), 'Self-Control and the Self', pp. 31-64 in Mischel, W., (ed.), *The Self: Psychological and Philosophical Issues*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Mixon, D., (1980), 'The Place of Habit in the Control of Action', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 10 (3) 169-86.

Molm, L.D. (1981), 'The Legitimacy of Behavioral Theory as a Sociological Perspective' *The American Sociologist* 16, 153-165.

Porpora, D.V., (1983), 'On the Post-Wittgensteinian Critique of the Concept of Action in Sociology' *The Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 13:129-46.

Silverman, D., (1970), *The Theory of Organisations*, London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Skinner, B. F., (1968), *Contingencies of Reinforcement: A Theoretical Analysis*, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Turner, J.H., (1988), 'A Behavioral Theory of Social Structure' *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 18 (4) 355-68.

Von Mises, L., (1949), *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, London: William Hodge.

Weber, M., (1964), *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. Henderson, A.M. and Parsons, T., (ed.) with Intro. by Parsons, T., New York: Free Press.