

Briefly on Behaviorism and Introspectionism

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Psychology in its early form focused on the introspective method by which a person studied the mind by recording the contents of his or her conscious experience to the best of their ability. One of the foremost proponents of this method was Edward Titchner. Even though Titchner made great strides in the field of psychology, there were many criticisms of the introspective method. One of the most profound criticisms was that by virtue of directing your attention at your own consciousness, you will necessarily distort the conscious experience being introspected. Put another way, thinking about something is not the same as thinking about thinking about something. To this criticism, Titchner basically said a well trained introspectionist will be able to introspect via force of habit, and therefore the introspection will not be distorted. Of course the counter criticism to that might be that internalizing the introspective effort via force of habit still leaves the distortion; The distortion is still there, but just no longer noticed.

One of the researchers who did not like an introspectionist approach was John Watson, the father of Behaviorism. Watson's Behaviorism was an attempt to circumvent the problems associated with introspectionism by focusing directly on directly observable and measurable variables, namely a stimulus and a resulting behavior. Anything that happened internally between the stimulus and the response was simply disregarded as unimportant. Watson did not think what happened in the black box of the mind could be reliably studied so he simply did away with it as unimportant. This approach was actually quite successful in a number of areas, and Watson was not shy to boast about it. He famously claimed that if given a well-formed baby he could shape it to grow up to any profession he wanted. This bravado was great for pushing his agenda and for popularizing psychology, but it had long lasting effects well outside the halls of academia. With a behaviorist point of view, if a child grew up to be a criminal, or developed schizophrenia, the parents were blamed.

There were many psychologists that followed in Watson's footsteps that are grouped as neo-behaviorists. Many of them were not quite so willing to leave the innerworkings of the mind as an ineffable black box. Of those, Edward Tolman may have done the most to break the the behaviorist mode of thought in psychology. His research on internal maps and latent learning showed that simple reinforcement methods cannot account for all the learning that goes on. In doing so, he helped pave the way for the cognitive revolution in psychology that put the inscrutable black box of the mind back under the microscope.