

A Tribute to B. F. Skinner at 100: His Awards and Honors

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B. F. Skinner (1904-1990) is among the most eminent, prolific, and widely cited figures in modern psychology. Throughout the course of his distinguished career (1930-1990), he was the recipient of numerous awards and honors from various associations, societies, colleges, and universities. He was recognized for his experimental research, its extensions and applications, and philosophical contributions, both nationally and internationally, and both in psychology and the sciences in general. In this paper, we pay tribute to Skinner on the centennial of his birth by reviewing the awards and honors he received over the course of his career.

Key words: B. F. Skinner, awards, honors, history

B. F. Skinner (1904-1990) is among the most widely cited and influential psychologists in American history. Indeed, he is regarded as the most eminent psychologist of the 20th century, ranked ahead of Freud and Piaget (see Haggbloom et al., 2002). His death at the age of 86, in 1990, was preceded by over 60 years of significant contributions. It was a remarkable career that included many accolades (see Appendix).

Among his awards and honors, Skinner was recognized for his philosophical contributions (e.g., Humanist of the Year award, American Humanist Society, 1972), his experimental research (e.g., Howard Crosby Warren Medal, 1942), and its extensions and applications (e.g., National Association for Retarded Citizens first annual award, 1978). These were garnered nationally (e.g., National Medal of Science, 1968) and internationally (e.g., International Award of the Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation for Mental Retardation, 1971), and in psychology (e.g., Citation for Outstanding Lifetime Contribution to Psychology, American Psychology Association, 1990) and the sciences

more generally (e.g., President's Award, New York Academy of Science, 1985). He also received awards and honors from professional associations (e.g., American Educational Research Association, Distinguished Contributions to Educational Research Award and Development, 1978), societies (e.g., American Psychological Society, William James Fellow Award, 1990), colleges (e.g., Hamilton College, Sc.D., 1951), and universities (e.g., John Hopkins University, L.H.D., 1979). In this paper, we pay tribute to Skinner on the centennial of his birth by reviewing the awards and honors he received for his contributions to psychology, its applications, and its philosophy over the course of his career.

Harvard University: 1928-1936

In the fall of 1928, at age 24, Skinner entered Harvard University as a graduate student in psychology. After an unsatisfactory literary interlude, he had become interested in a science of human behavior, influenced in part through Bertrand Russell's philosophical writings and the more technical works of Jacques Loeb, Ivan P. Pavlov, and John B. Watson (see Skinner, 1986a). On his entrance to Harvard, however, Skinner was not yet "a fully committed convert to psychology"

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(Skinner, 1979, p. 37) and the Department of Psychology was not yet sympathetic to the kind of research that interested him (Skinner, 1956). Thus, as a graduate student, he worked mainly on what interested him, without much direct supervision (Skinner, 1967, 1979, p. 35). In a Baconian style, he was “asking questions of the organism rather than of those who have studied the organism” (Skinner, 1967, p. 409). In 1930, he was given his first award -- he was made a Thayer Fellow. Of the fellowship, he wrote: It “clinched my loyalty to psychology by giving me a fairly large room as an office and laboratory” (Skinner, 1979, p. 35).

In March of 1931, Skinner received his doctorate and, the same year, under the auspices of E. G. Boring and W. J. Crozier, two research fellowships. He received a Walker Fellowship (1931-1932) and was made a National Research Council Fellow (1931-1933). Two years later, he was invited to become a Junior Fellow in the newly founded and prestigious Harvard Society of Fellows (1933-1936). As a Junior Fellow, Skinner came into contact with some of the most prominent scholars of the day. For instance, in 1934, Skinner met the philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, one of the Society's first Senior Fellows, while dining at the Society. During a discussion of behaviorism, Professor Whitehead challenged Skinner to explain language as behavior (see Skinner, 1957, pp. 456-457). The following morning, Skinner began working on what he judged was his most important book, *Verbal Behavior* (Skinner, 1957; see Skinner, 1977, p. 379).

As Fellow, Skinner had no teaching responsibilities, and thus devoted himself to formulating and refining his science -- the experimental analysis of behavior -- and, importantly, differentiating it from Pavlov's (1927) stimulus-response reflexology. In his science, he continued the program of research he had described in part of his thesis published as “The Concept of the Reflex in the Description of Behavior” (Skinner, 1931). That is, he conducted studies to “follow up leads arising from [his own] work itself,” where he “answered questions, clarified points, and solved practical problems” (Skinner, 1979, p. 343). Much of his empirical research and the behavioral system that arose from it culminated in his seminal book, *The Behavior of Organisms* (Skinner, 1938).

University of Minnesota: 1936-1945

At age 32, Skinner left Harvard and the shelter of his research fellowships for his first academic position, this at the University of Minnesota. There, he began extending the systematic position he had described in *The Behavior of Organisms* to more complex cases, including verbal behavior. For instance, he taught courses and gave lectures under the titles of “The Psychology of Literature” and “The Psychology of Language.” In 1942, he received a John Simon Memorial Guggenheim Foundation fellowship to focus more on this work, but he requested a postponement until after World War II. When he resumed the Guggenheim for the 1944-1945 academic year, he used it to refine and extend the basic formulation and conceptual framework for what would become his 1947 William James Lectures at Harvard and, 10 years later, *Verbal Behavior*.

By the end of 1941, Skinner had published 53 works, 45 of them reports of experimental research, for which he had a reputation as an original experimenter (Bjork, 1998, p. 267). In 1942, at age 38, he received his first national recognition for these contributions. He was awarded the Howard Crosby Warren Medal from the Society of Experimental Psychologists, of which he had been a member since 1938. The Society, also known as “The Experimentalists,” was founded in 1904 by the structuralist, E. B. Titchener, a student of Wilhelm Wundt (see Boring, 1938, 1967).

During Skinner's years at Minnesota, he was drawn away from his 1932 “Plan for the Campaign for the Years 30-60” (see Skinner, 1979, p. 115) by several unforeseen “products of time and chance” (Skinner, 1979, p. 344). Although this plan was grounded in the experimental analysis of behavior, Skinner instead took up projects of a more applied nature, such as Project Pigeon (Skinner, 1960), the mechanical baby-tender (Skinner, 1945), and his utopian novel, *Walden Two* (Skinner, 1948), his fictional account of a behaviorally-engineered community.

Indiana University: 1945-1948

In the fall of 1945, at age 41, Skinner became Professor and Chair of the Department

of Psychology at Indiana University. In spite of his administrative responsibilities, he continued to publish research on the analysis of behavior. He studied differential reinforcement of low rates of responding, choice, matching-to-sample, reaction time, and superstition (see, e.g., Skinner, 1979, pp. 343, 341), summarizing much of it in his May, 1949 Presidential Address at the meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association titled "Are Theories of learning Necessary?" (Skinner, 1950).

By the mid-1940s, Skinner's program of research was being replicated, refined, and extended at other universities (e.g., Columbia University). When communication among them became difficult, he and Fred Keller started a series of Conferences on the Experimental Analysis of Behavior (1947-1951), the first one held in Bloomington, Indiana, in June 1947 (Dinsmoor, 1987). These conferences served as a model for such later organizations as the Society for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior (est. 1957), Division 25 of the American Psychological Association (est. 1964), and the Association for Behavior Analysis (est. 1974).

For Skinner, his Minnesota and Indiana years marked a change in the direction of his research, as he "considered issues that came not from the research itself but from an application" (Skinner, 1986b, p. 229). In *The Behavior of Organisms*, he had concluded by saying, "Let him extrapolate who will" (Skinner, 1938, p. 442). The 1940s marked the beginnings of his extrapolations, as noted above, and included the William James Lectures he gave at Harvard in the fall of 1947, titled, "Verbal Behavior: A Psychological Analysis."

Harvard University Revisited: 1948-1990

On the strength of these Lectures, Skinner was invited to join the Harvard's Psychology Department (Skinner, 1967). In September of 1948, two decades after he arrived as a graduate student, Skinner, at age 44, returned to Harvard as a faculty member. As he described his career to that point:

I had made up for my slow start in the profession. I was returning to Harvard as a full professor. I had been proposed for

membership in the two most prestigious learned societies for which I was eligible and had been elected [in 1948] to what [Walter] Hunter called the better one--the American Philosophical Society, founded [in 1743] by Benjamin Franklin. (I would make the other, the National Academy of Sciences, the following year). (Skinner, 1979, p. 341)

Back at Harvard, Skinner amassed an extensive list of accomplishments and contributions, from laboratory-based research -- particularly during the late 1940s to the early 1960s, and briefly again in the early 1980s -- to extensions and applications of his science to education (e.g., Skinner, 1968), human services (e.g., Skinner, 1972a, pp. 283-291), and society at large (e.g., Skinner, 1971). As a result, still other awards and honors came his way.

On January 1, 1958 Skinner succeeded Boring as the second Edgar Pierce Professor of Psychology at Harvard. Later that year, at age 54, he received the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award from the American Psychological Association (APA). The Association (1958) described him as:

An imaginative and creative scientist, characterized by great objectivity in scientific matters and by warmth and enthusiasm in personal matters... Few American psychologists have had so profound an impact on the development of psychology and on promising younger psychologists. (p. 735)

In return for the award, Skinner gave a lecture at the next APA meeting (Skinner, 1982, p. 259, 1983, p. 169). It was based on his just declassified wartime research at Minnesota -- Project Pigeon (1940-1944) -- and titled, "Pigeons in a Pelican" (Skinner, 1960).

In the early 1950s, Skinner began applying his science to education, the impetus for which was a visit to his younger daughter's fourth grade arithmetic class on November 11, 1953. In his words:

Possibly through no fault of her own, the teacher was violating two fundamental principles: the students were not being told at once whether their work was right of

wrong (a corrected paper seen twenty-four hours later could not act as a reinforcer), and they were all moving at the same pace regardless of preparation or ability. (Skinner, 1983, p. 64)

In a matter of days, he had constructed a prototype of a teaching machine based on principles of behavior derived from his research. A few months later, at a conference on Current Trends in Psychology on March 12, 1954, he delivered his first paper on education, "The Science of Learning and the Art of Teaching" (Skinner, 1954), in which he "demonstrated a machine that could teach spelling and arithmetic" (Skinner, 1967, p. 406). Within a few years, a teaching machine and programmed instruction movement began (Benjamin, 1988), to which Skinner made significant advances in over 30 subsequent publications across the remainder of his career (Morris, 2003).

In the years that followed, Skinner's contributions to education led to further professional recognition -- APA's Edward Lee Thorndike Award (1966), the Creative Leadership in Education Award from New York University (1972), the American Educational Research Association Award (1978), and the Scholar Hall of Fame Award from The Academy of Resource and Development (1997). A recent survey has ranked him among the most influential contributors to the field of special education (see Polloway, 2000).

While considering retirement in the early 1960s, Skinner applied for a Career Award from the National Institute of Mental Health. His project title was "A Behavioral Analysis of Cultural Practices" (Skinner, 1983, p. 227). In 1964, at age 60, he received the Award, writing:

For five years, renewable for another five, it would free me from all commitments to the University and allow me to devote myself to an analysis of cultural practices from the point of view of an experimental analysis of behavior. Of the four books [Skinner, 1969, 1971, 1972, 1974]

written during those 10 years, of his career award, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* was closest to the assigned theme. The grant terminated upon my retirement in 1974 [as professor emeritus],

but I have continued to work in the same vein. (Skinner, 1982, p. 38)

On January 17, 1968 Skinner received the highest scientific award bestowed by the United States government, the National Medal of Science. During the last days of his administration, President Lyndon B. Johnson recognized Skinner for his "basic and imaginative contributions to the study of behavior which had profound influence upon all psychology and many related areas" (APA, 1969, p. 468). He was just the third psychologist to receive the Medal since it was established in 1959 by the 86th Congress; the two others were Neal E. Miller (1964) and Harry F. Harlow (1967). Of the many awards Skinner received throughout his career, he only publicly displayed his certificate for the National Medal of Science, although even then only in the basement of his house (Vargas & Chance, 2002).

By the late 1960s, Skinner had become a prominent figure in American psychology (see Davis, Thomas, & Weaver, 1982; Francher, 1979; Gilgen, 1981; Myers, 1970; Perlman, 1980; Wright, 1970). In a 1970 Festschrift published in honor of him on his 65th birthday, Dews (1970) wrote of Skinner:

Massive advances in science can affect society either by changing man's views of himself or by leading to substantive changes in his environment.... Skinner's discoveries in the field of the transaction of a higher organism with its environment will have a greater and more enduring effect on man's view of himself than the views of Freud. Meanwhile, slowly but increasingly, education is being influenced by Skinner's findings, and perhaps some day they may influence broadly how men dispense justice and punishment, raise children, handle neuroses, organize an economic system and conduct international relations. (pp. ix-x)

In 1971 he was awarded the Gold Medal from the American Psychological Foundation for his lifetime achievements and enduring contributions to psychology. The following year, he received a Career Contribution Award from the Massachusetts Psychological Association.

Skinner's concerns for the implications of his science for society at large, and his contributions thereto, led to still other awards and honors, these for his philosophical and humanistic contributions. In 1971, he received an International Award from the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., Foundation for Mental Retardation, renowned as the "Nobel Prize" in the field of human services; Mother Teresa had been a previous recipient (see Skinner, 1983, p. 325). On the occasion of the award, he presented a paper titled "Compassion and Ethics in the Care of Retarded Persons" (Skinner, 1972a). Despite some opposition, the American Humanist Society named Skinner "Humanist of the Year" in 1972 (see Skinner, 1972b). About this he wrote:

Many people objected to my nomination. Must a Humanist not believe in free will and freedom of thought? Would a Skinnerian world not mean 'destruction of all that we who are Humanist know ourselves to be?' On other grounds I myself had had doubts. I had been a contributing member of the American Humanist Association for many years, and I was an honorary member of the Rationalist Press in Britain, which published the *New Humanist*, a journal more militantly anticlerical and anti-big-state than the American *Humanist*, but I was bothered by the aggrandizement of the individual in much Humanist writing. With the publication of *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* my position became awkward. If Humanism meant nothing more than the maximizing of personal freedom and dignity, then I was not a Humanist. If it meant trying to save the human species, then I was. (Skinner, 1983, pp. 343)

In 1978, Skinner received the first annual award from the National Association for Retarded Citizens. In 1985, he was given an Award for Excellence in Psychiatry by the Albert Einstein School of Medicine and, later that year, the President's Award by the New York Academy of Science. In 1990, he received the William James Fellow Award from the American Psychological Society for "lifetime of significant intellectual contributions to the basic science of psychology." Finally, on August 10, 1990 Skinner was awarded

APA's first Presidential Citation for Lifetime Contributions to Psychology. The Association's (1990) citation summarized his contributions as follows:

As a creative scientist with a vision, you led a groundbreaking movement in psychology that challenged our views of behavior and inspired numerous advances in the field. Your incisive analysis of contingencies of reinforcement and your articulation of its implications for evolutionary theory and verbal behavior, your insightful views on the philosophy of behaviorism, your innovations in research methodology, and the breadth of the practical applications of your scientific work are unparalleled among contemporary psychologists. (p. 1205)

Conclusion

On the basis of his many and varied contributions over the course of his long career, B. F. Skinner became a prominent scientist, philosopher, scholar, and humanitarian. His many awards and honors readily attest to this. Of course, they do not mean that his views in psychology were universally accepted (e.g., Skinner, 1957) or that his prescriptions for cultural practices were followed (e.g., Skinner, 1971). Many scientists and scholars dispute what Skinner had to say (e.g., Chomsky, 1957; Scribner, 1972). He remains a controversial figure (see, e.g., Modgil & Modgil, 1987).

Nevertheless, for Skinner himself, it was his works -- not his acclaim, accolades, or achievements -- that were most important. For instance, when by accident he recorded his first extinction curve, he wrote later: "It was a Friday afternoon and there was no one I could tell. All weekend I crossed streets with particular care and avoided all unnecessary risks to protect my discovery from loss through my death" (Skinner, 1979, p. 95). However,

...it was the curve and not my accomplishment that I was carefully preserving. I have felt the same way when writing some of my books: I must stay alive until they are finished but again because I believe in the

importance of what I am saying, (Skinner, 1983, p. 410)

In these regards, Skinner noted that his behavior as a scientist was shaped and maintained largely by his subject matter:

That is why I was able to work for almost twenty years with practically no professional recognition. People supported me, but not my line of work; only my rats and pigeons supported *that*. I was never in any doubt at its importance, however, and when it began to attract attention, I was wary of the effect rather than pleased. Many notes in my files comment on the fact that I have been depressed or frightened by so-called honors. I forgo honors which would take time away from my work or unduly reinforce specific aspects of it. (Skinner, 1967, p. 408)

Skinner's genetic endowment and personal history produced a notable organism, but we would claim no special credit. As he remarked in his autobiography (Skinner, 1983), "By tracing what I have done to my environmental history rather than assigning it to a mysterious creative process, I have relinquished all chance of being called a Great Thinker" (p. 411). Through his enduring contributions, though, Skinner did obtain a form of immortality. If contemporary scholars would construct a better record, and then better histories, of these contributions -- basic, applied, and conceptual -- then those contributions might become clearer, more accessible, and lead perhaps to even better science, application, and theory. As Skinner (1983) noted, "a scientist is only science's way of making more science" (p. 408).

We conclude our tribute to Skinner on the centennial of his birth by quoting from his February 12, 1966 presidential address to the Pavlovian Society:

Facts and formulations of facts change as science progresses. The experimental spirit and integrity of the scientist do not change. In the abiding aspects of the life of a scientist we still have much to learn from Ivan Petrovitch Pavlov. (Skinner, 1966, p. 78)

We, too, still have much to learn from Burrhus Frederic Skinner.

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Appendix

Chronology of B. F. Skinner's Awards and Honors

Career

1926 A.B., Hamilton University; 1930 M.A., Harvard University; 1930-1931 Thayer Fellowship; 1931 Ph.D., Harvard University; 1931-1932 Walker Fellowship; 1931-1933 National Research Council Fellowship; 1933-1936 Junior Fellowship, Harvard Society of Fellows; 1936-1937 Instructor, University of Minnesota; 1937-1939 Assistant Professor, University of Minnesota; 1939-1945 Associate Professor, University of Minnesota; 1942 Guggenheim Fellowship (postponed until 1944-1945); 1942 Howard Crosby Warren Medal, Society of Experimental Psychologists; 1945-1948 Professor and Chair, Indiana University; 1947-1948 William James Lecturer, Harvard University; 1948-1958 Professor, Harvard University; 1949-1950 President of the Midwestern Psychological Association; 1954-1955 President of the Eastern Psychological Association; 1958 Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award, American Psychological Association; 1958-1974 Edgar Pierce Professor of Psychology, Harvard University; 1964-1974 Career Award, National Institute of Mental Health; 1966 Edward Lee Thorndike Award, American Psychological Association; 1966-1967 President of the Pavlovian Society of North America; 1968 National Medal of Science, National Science Foundation; 1969 Overseas Fellow in Churchill College, Cambridge; 1971 Gold Medal Award, American Psychological Foundation; 1971 Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., Foundation for Mental Retardation International award; 1972 Humanist of the Year Award, American Humanist Society; 1972 Creative Leadership in Education Award, New York University; 1972 Career Contribution Award, Massachusetts Psychological Association; 1974-1990 Professor of Psychology and Social Relations Emeritus, Harvard University; 1978 Distinguished Contributions to Educational Research Award and Development, American Educational Research Association; 1978 National Association for Retarded Citizens Award; 1985 Award for Excellence in Psychiatry, Albert Einstein School of

Medicine; 1985 President's Award, New York Academy of Science; 1990 William James Fellow Award, American Psychological Society; 1990 Lifetime Achievement Award, American Psychology Association; 1991 Outstanding Member and Distinguished Professional Achievement Award, Society for Performance Improvement; 1997 Scholar Hall of Fame Award, Academy of Resource and Development

Honorary Degrees: Colleges and Universities

Alfred University, Dickinson College, Hamilton College, Harvard University, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, John Hopkins University, Keio University, McGill University, North Carolina State University, Ohio Wesleyan University, Ripon College, Rockford College, Tufts University, University of Chicago, University of Exeter, University of Missouri, University of North Texas, Western Michigan University

Awards in His Name

The B. F. Skinner Prize (Hamilton College), The B. F. Skinner Award (APA, Div. 12)