

STUDENT PAPER WINNER**CONTRIBUTIONS OF BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS TO THE
STUDY OF HUMAN SOCIAL BEHAVIOR**

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The psychological study of human interaction can be traced back to the late 19th century. In the first experimental study in social psychology, Triplett (1898) examined several facets of competitive behavior and concluded that increased performance was due to “dynamogenic” factors present in the competitive context. Since that time, traditional social psychologists have studied extensively those variables purported to influence and control the social behavior of both human and nonhuman organisms. To date, this approach to the study of social behavior has resulted in the acquisition of a substantial amount of knowledge regarding social interaction.

Another approach to the study of human social behavior is based on the early writings of B. F. Skinner. This approach, known as the experimental analysis of behavior (EAB), traditionally has been concerned with discovering basic principles that govern behavior and has provided a unique means of examining both human and nonhuman animal behavior. Behavioral interpretations for phenomena as diverse as emotions, verbal behavior, self-control, thinking, governmental practices, and religion have been provided. More recently, researchers have suggested that basic behavioral principles may be used to explain human social behavior.

Behaviorally defined, social behavior is behavior for which the controlling stimuli are mediated by the behavior and/or behavioral products of one or more individuals. The experimental analysis of social behavior (EASB) began with the early writings of Miller and Dollard (1941), Keller and Schoenfeld, (1950), and Skinner (1953). Later, Hake (1982) recommended that basic research on social behavior commence with humans because these complex behaviors lie in the middle of the basic-applied continuum and are less accessible in nonhumans. Unfortunately, few have followed Hake’s exhortations. Early investigations of human social behavior had little influence on subsequent experimental analyses, and numerous topics such as sharing, altruism, and trust remain essentially unexplored (e.g., Buskist & Miller, 1982; Dougherty, Nedelmann, & Alfred, 1993).

By far, the social behavior that has received the most attention within EASB is cooperation. Most definitions of cooperation allude to the combined

behavior of two or more individuals and an equitable distribution of reinforcers. In contrast, competition has been defined as a situation in which two or more persons respond, but reinforcers are distributed based on relative performance. Although not examined as extensively as cooperation, competition has been the focus of numerous experimental analyses. Finally, a smaller number of studies have examined several other social behaviors including sharing, altruism, imitation, trust, and social comparison.

As with most areas of scientific inquiry, a critique of EASB has identified several positive experimental practices (e.g., precisely defining the social behavior under study and isolating important social variables). Unfortunately, the number of social phenomena, as well as the quantity of studies investigating these phenomena, has remained relatively small. Clearly, considerable work remains, but past research has laid the groundwork for subsequent analyses of important social variables. Researchers would do well to direct their attention to one of the most pervasive of all human behaviors—social behavior.

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