KEY CONCEPT: BEHAVIOUR

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Concept origins

Behaviour refers to observable actions which are classified and understood in relation to commonly accepted standards and norms. The adaptation of behaviour in relation to environmental demands (Darwin, 1859, 1871), can be seen as one of the distinguishing features of early hominids, our early bipedal human ancestors, along with tool making, rudimentary language development, and art (Catania, 1985; Potts, 2002). In philosophy, Plato in 380BC depicted adaptation to one's appropriate position within **society** and playing one's 'proper' function as conducive to a good life (2008). Similar precursors to **functionalism** are evident, particularly in the **ethics**-led naturalism of Hobbes (1651), who argued that human behaviour in the 'state of nature' would involve incessant conflict, the pursuit of **power** and individual interests. Life as a result would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short' (Hobbes, 1994, p.76). Behaviour, Hobbes argued, was only held in check through a form of social contract, supported by authority through **politics**. More optimistic views of human nature and behaviour were articulated by David Hume (1751), among others, whose emphasis on sympathy or fellow-feeling, what we would now refer to as empathy, he saw as driving action (1998). Such divergent views on our underlying human nature and its expression in behaviour inevitably pulled education **policy** and **praxis** in competing directions.

Current status and usage

Understanding human behaviour in Darwinian evolutionary terms, such that its adaptation facilitated the survival and reproduction of its practitioners, has resulted in contemporary reworkings of these theories in sociobiology (Dawkins, 1976; Wilson,

2000) and in a more nuanced way in evolutionary psychology (Wright, 1994; *cf.* Cziko, 2000). Evolutionary psychology, in particular, gives greater recognition to environmental influences on behaviour and to human flexibility. More generally, behaviour as a conceptual entity is commonly associated—in a rather reductive fashion—with **behaviourism** in psychology. However, other **school**s of psychological thought (from **attachment** theory through **psychoanalysis** to **constructivism**), have substantial interest in behaviour, generally seeing its external observable manifestations as mediated responses to external or internal stimuli, including unconscious sources. In view of the tendency to evaluate behaviour in relation to societal norms, schools and other social institutions are commonly charged with its policing and regulation. Education approaches this through a wide variety of means, including **pedagogy**, behaviour and discipline policies, **school culture**, and the **hidden curriculum**. Psychologically informed techniques are typically employed in these contexts in efforts to promote desired and minimise unwanted behaviour. Occasionally, where biological factors are thought to be implicated, medication can have a role; attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) being perhaps the best known such case (Long *et al.*, 2011). Such control of persons is inevitably problematic, with the norms appealed to for its justification being variously disputed, fragmentary or fictional. In this critical context, Foucault's (1978–1986) work on biopower and control of **society** has influenced many.

Control of behaviour is commonly sought through various types of psycho-social manipulation, such as threats or promises, in an effort to steer individual or group behaviour in a socio-culturally desired direction. With education and the **school** placed at the forefront of this 'civilising' process, the stakes are very high. Societal anxieties about children and young people (deMause, 2002), of liveliness, and of aggression, have fuelled educational **policy** and practice that can entail the repression of spontaneity and even the creation of emotional inhibitions, as **psychoanalysis** has long argued (Freud, 1907). Education can thus form not just scaffolding to support behavioural and emotional growth, but can become a straight-jacket that

restricts freedom in relation to many key areas, from **gender** and **sexuality** through **politics,** to intellectual endeavour. With behaviour at the forefront of many schools' and **teachers**' concerns, and poor student behaviour being implicated in the high attrition rate among (especially newly qualified) teachers (Aloe *et al.*, 2014), further training and advice on the topic is high on the wish-lists of many in education. Texts such as Sue Cowley's *Getting the Buggers to Behave* (2014) have become understandably popular in such contexts.

Positioning behaviour as either a 'problem' or more severely as a 'disorder' typically involves judgements about its persistency and frequency and the degree to which it violates social norms or impairs an individual's functioning. However, the capacity to engineer behaviour change in response to such **labelling** through social experience and **learning** varies according to factors such as the degree of **plasticity** inherent in the behaviour: high plasticity leaves ample room for change, whereas low levels involve inflexible behaviour patterns. Let us take so-called anti-social behaviour as one example to illustrate this. Moffitt (1993) distinguished two groups who exhibit anti-social behaviour – one where the behaviour is life-course persistent and another where it is largely limited to adolescence. Neuropsychological and adverse environmental factors typify the former group, whereas Moffitt saw the latter group's behaviour as virtually normative and attributable to peer processes and an experienced maturity gap between biological and social maturity (*cf.* Erikson, 1968). Subsequent studies, summarised by Fairchild *et al.* (2013), while corroborating Moffitt's view of the life-course persistent group, suggested that anti-social behaviour emerging in adolescence can run into adulthood and can be associated with neuropsychological and neurochemical patterns similar to those found in the former group. This challenges any clear-cut distinction between intervention strategies specifically tailored to one or other group. Bullying is another example. This is perhaps the highest profile of the problem behaviours encountered in **school**s. Its management is challenging, with recent research highlighting significant declines in anti-bullying programme effectiveness with older adolescents (Long *et al.*, 2011; Yeager, *et al.*, 2015). Again, careful study of the phenomena, distinguishing its various sub-types, the causal factors of each, and appropriate interventions is likely to lead to better outcomes.

As with other concepts, behaviour is a site of contest. Traditional conceptualisations of disruptive behaviour, often drawing on social **learning** theory and disease models, depicted such behaviour as a result of exposure to environmental models. More recent longitudinal research, usefully summarised by Tremblay (2010), suggests that disruptive behaviours are a much more universal phenomenon during early **childhood** and that these give way to pro-social behaviours, which are themselves learned from environmental sources. Failure to acquire alternative behaviours congruent with social norms typically leads to varieties of formal and informal **labelling**. Given the differing and complex genetic, epigenetic and environmental influences on such behaviour formation (Morgado and Vale-Dias, 2013), intervention and prevention strategies unsurprisingly range from the psycho-social to the extreme bio-medical. Questioning of both social norms against which behaviour is judged and the control strategies deployed to shape it has drawn on a range of critical **discourses**. Gramsci's (1971) concept of **hegemony**, through which engineered '**consent**' for the shaping of **society**—and thus of behaviour—by the dominant group occurs, is particularly helpful. So too is Foucault's (1978–1986) emphasis on surveillance, **power** and biopower, particularly in helping question restrictive agendas on crucial areas such as **sexuality** and **gender**. In this context, the work of Butler (1990, 1993) occupies an interesting though questionable position, particularly in her deconstructive critique of such identities as substantially fictive social constructions, their apparent reality deriving from iterative doing (behaviour), thus aligning it with **performativity**. Concerns over the potentially repressive and alienating consequences of the educational establishment's efforts to manage behaviour, has for some time resulted in resistance from various quarters, articulated most notably through Illich's (1972) ideas on **deschooling**, Freire's (1970) on **democratic education**, and Holt's (1977) on **unschooling**. These trends have been furthered by broader questioning of both the reductive and potentially alienating impact of a narrow focus on behaviour. This has led in some quarters to a renewed emphasis on **relationships** and a more **holistic** approach; one such initiative is Parker *et al.*'s (2016) **attachment** based approach to supporting children's behaviour in **school**. While attachment theory is not free itself from criticism (e.g., around supposed essentialising and naturalising tendencies), such initiatives helpfully challenge the prevailing orthodoxies around behaviour, opening up space for greater critical thinking.

Questions to consider

1. Are people more than their behaviour?
2. If left to our own devices, would life be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'?
3. What are the benefits of restraint on our behaviour over the lifespan?
4. To what extent should **school**s be in the business of shaping behaviour?
5. Why is some people's objectionable behaviour tolerated more than others?

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