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**DISCUSSION TOPICS**

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**B. F. SKINNER**

**A FRESH APPRAISAL**

*Narration By*

**MURRAY SIDMAN Ph.D.**

(41 Minutes)



**DAVIDSON** *films*

*Expanding the Mind's Eye since 1955*

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## INTRODUCTION

*Other than Freud, no psychologist has been so discussed, critiqued and, at times, maligned as B.F. Skinner. Using both archival and new footage, this video takes a new look at who Burrhus Frederic Skinner (1904-1990) was, and what he really said in his twenty books.*

*Like other thinkers who broke new ground, Skinner had to invent his own vocabulary to describe the phenomena he was studying. In this video, his terms are introduced in context so the student understands how they were intended to be used and the research that produced them.*

*The video lays to rest some myths and credits Skinner with contributions not often attributed to him. Understanding the complex man behind his work enables students to better evaluate the importance and relevance of the work he inspired.*

*Murray Sidman, Ph.D., colleague and thoughtful practitioner of behavioral analysis, narrates.*

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We hope that you will send us topics for discussion that we may share with other instructors. Some of the topics can be used as essay questions, others as leads to discussion in class and still others are musings by the producer about what did not get into the videos. Please email us reactions and suggestions so we can continue to make the topics more useful.

Our email address is [dfi@davidsonfilms.com](mailto:dfi@davidsonfilms.com).

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1. Skinner's first statement in this video: "Nature to be commanded must be obeyed", was a favorite quote from Francis Bacon. Skinner first explored Bacon's work as the result of a favorite high school English teacher suggesting that perhaps Bacon wrote the Shakespeare plays. Throughout his life, one of Skinner's most appealing personality characteristics was his great curiosity. He explored nature, literature, music and art. Just flipping through *Verbal Behavior* gives one a sense of the range of his interests.

2. Skinner's work raised much controversy. It would be useful for current students to hear of your experience as a student in learning about Skinner whether you were introduced to his work by supporters or by opponents. What in his work attracted or repelled you?
  3. Why do you think his work was so revered and reviled? Compare the reaction of the public to his work and that of Freud's. Both reached out to the general public in ways that other psychologists did not. Freud tended to answer critics directly whereas Skinner did not, some say at his own expense. (Noam Chomsky's scathing review of *Verbal Behavior* was never answered.)
  4. Piaget wrote a book published in 1976 entitled *Behavior And Evolution*. He too thought his work extended that of Darwin. Skinner and Piaget rather studiously avoided each other's work though it does have many parallels. Discuss the basic similarities and differences.
  5. Skinner has been often been criticized for jumping from his animal lab work (his graduate school research was with rats; subsequently, he ran pigeon labs) to human concerns. He did not actively do human research but felt that the learning principles he had discovered with lab animals were applicable to humans. An example in the video is his discussion of human gambling. Would you have had him do research with humans? Of what sort?
  6. Skinnerians emphasize the importance of single subject research, which is very different from the group research in other fields of psychology. Discuss the differences and what you think their proper roles are.
  7. Although academic psychology is not now dominated by behaviorism, many of the concepts from it have become staples in contemporary life like the operant conditioning used with animal training and educational applications, especially with special education populations. What do you see as the most important applications coming out of Skinner's work? Why do you think the behavior modification movement of the 1970's has become less visible?
  8. Skinner's assertion that all learning is individual and that whole class instruction inevitably is wasteful has not affected the teaching methods of most schools. Do you agree with his premises? Can individual instruction be delivered to students in the kind of age group settings of traditional schools? How?
  9. Skinner's analysis of the transmission of culture through language has great similarities to Vygotsky's thoughts on the subject.
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## RELATED FILMS

*Also Available from Davidson Films*

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*This is one of nine films in the Davidson Films “Giants” series. The other titles in this series are:*

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***JOHN BOWLBY: ATTACHMENT THEORY ACROSS GENERATIONS*** (2007) 40 minutes

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