

# B.F. Skinner: Scientist, Celebrity, Social Visionary

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*Digging into the history of psychological science, the Observer has retrieved classic interviews with prominent psychological scientists for an ongoing series Psychology (Yesterday and) Today. Each interview is introduced by a contemporary psychological scientist, and the full text of the interview is available on the Observer website. We invite you to reflect on the words of these legendary scientists, and decide whether their voices still resonate with the science of today.*

Burrhus Frederic Skinner once famously stated, “If I am right about human behavior, I have written the autobiography of a nonperson.” This attention-grabbing remark, made in 1983 after he had completed the *third* volume of his autobiography, captures why Skinner has been such a polarizing figure: We tend to be interested in *people*. Moreover, we tend to *experience* ourselves as people, not as loci of genes, environmental stimuli, and complex reinforcement histories. The two *Psychology Today* interviews with Skinner, the first by Mary Harrington Hall in 1967 and the second by Elizabeth Hall in 1972, actually reveal much about Skinner as a person and as a deeply impassioned scientist-turned-social-visionary. For as careful and rigorous a scientist as Skinner was, it was his social vision that made him, at least for a brief moment, a celebrity.

Published just five years apart, these two interviews capture an important slice of Skinner’s career trajectory. When he was first interviewed in 1967, it was already eight years after Noam Chomsky’s review of Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior* had supposedly dealt a death-blow to behaviorism, and Skinner remarked casually that he might have another five good years left (he was actually productive right up to his death in 1990). In the late 1960s, behavior modification was spreading like wildfire in classrooms, hospitals, and prisons. Skinner made a reference in both interviews to a program he was particularly excited about, a program at the National Training School for Boys (which was a juvenile correctional facility in the mid-1960s) that employed a token economy to help inmates reach educational goals. By the time Skinner was interviewed in 1972, he had published *Beyond Freedom and Dignity (BFD)* and was widely characterized as a fascist. As one young reader put it, “I think I would have burnt your book, but that had fascist overtones and besides, I wanted to show it to a few people first. You make me sick. How’s that for subjectivity?”

The two interviews also bookend an extremely turbulent period in American history, a fact that no doubt influenced Skinner in writing *BFD*. When 1967’s summer of love brought widespread attention to the counterculture movement, he made his assessment of the “hippie culture” clear in the 1967 interview. He said, “Young people have discovered techniques of control, and they have also discovered ways of escaping from the techniques used on them. Again, they defend themselves with a philosophy of freedom. They demand the right to do as they please. Often this takes the form of doing whatever is immediately gratifying — taking drugs, having sex, playing an easy instrument like the guitar, or doing nothing.” Writing a bit later in response to a college student’s inquiry, he noted, “I believe the hippie philosophy emphasizes doing little or nothing for society. It seems to me that the hippie culture does not take its ultimate consequences into account, and could not survive except as a parasite.” Despite his

general disdain for the counterculture as a whole, Skinner did endorse two intentional communities inspired, at least in part, by the utopianism of this cultural moment: Twin Oaks in Louisa, Virginia, and Los Horcones in Hermosillo, Mexico. Both were inspired by his novel *Walden Two*, but they were clearly not hippie communes.

By the time of the 1972 interview, *BFD* had reached the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. The second interview was conducted “in the aftermath” of this new-found notoriety. It reflects Skinner’s fervent desire to see behavioral technology taken up to solve social problems. As Skinner put it, “I think we’re making a mess of things, and all our problems have to do with behavior.” This belief in using behavioral technology to design suitable cultures led Skinner to write *BFD*. The trick, according to him, was to convince people that we *need* to design cultures using effective methods, given our behaviors are already being manipulated anyway. Of particular concern to him, in the interview and in his book, was the threat of nuclear war. The Cold War was a consistent backdrop to Skinner’s scientific career and no doubt influenced much of his thinking about the need for behavioral technology.

Skinner’s particular technological bent, however, was evident very early in his upbringing. As a young boy, he grew tired of being scolded for leaving his pajamas on the bedroom floor, so he invented a gadget that would remind him to pick them up before leaving his room. Designing gadgets to make life easier was a consistent theme both at home and at work. His first professional “gadget” was a pigeon-guided missile system designed for use in WWII, although it never got past the prototype stage. His next invention, which he discussed in the 1967 interview, was the baby tender, also called the aircrib and — infamously — the baby box. Skinner and his wife Yvonne used the tender with their second daughter, Deborah. Although Skinner is a bit nonchalant about the significance of the device in his interview, remarking that it solves “only a very simple physical problem” of child-rearing, he nonetheless spent considerable effort in the 1940s and 1950s trying to interest someone in mass-producing it.

A gadget in which Skinner did take a serious professional interest was the teaching machine, or, more properly, programmed instruction. In the 1967 interview, he stated authoritatively and optimistically, “I have no doubt at all that programmed instruction based on operant principles will take over education.” Skinner’s optimism was not unwarranted at the time. In the early 1960s, programmed instruction was touted widely as one of the most promising, indeed revolutionary, of the educational technologies being developed in the then-ascendant educational technology movement. In 1961, a writer for *Science Digest* wrote, “A few months ago, thousands of school children from coast to coast were quietly subjected to what may turn out to be the greatest educational revolution in history. They began the first large-scale experiment in learning, not from human teachers, but from teaching machines.” By 1972, however, the enthusiasm for the machines had diminished. Reflecting his increasing pessimism about the state of education (and the world) that had catalyzed *BFD*, Skinner said, “I’m concerned with improving education. Programmed instruction could make a great difference. Industry, which appreciates a good thing, uses it extensively. Yet it is only beginning to be used on a reasonable scale in grade schools and high schools.” Indeed, the “takeover” of education that Skinner envisioned never came to pass.

The 1972 interview was part of the public relations maelstrom that followed the release of *BFD*. As Elizabeth Hall notes in her post-script, Skinner appeared on several nationally broadcast television programs and became a recognizable public figure. By his own count, Skinner reported that he made over 40 radio and television appearances at this time, and he wound up on the cover of *Time* magazine in September of 1971. In 1972, references to *BFD* even appeared in advertisements for Dewars White

Label blended scotch whiskey!

Whiskey sales aside, with 40 years of hindsight, what is Skinner's place in history? Mary Harrington Hall, in the preface to her 1967 interview, suggests that "when history makes its judgment, he may well be known as the major contributor to psychology in this century." It is safe to say that Hall's rather cautious prediction has been borne out. In contemporary surveys of disciplinary eminence, Skinner's name always rises to the top of the list. Over a career that spanned more than 60 years, he published over 20 books. His science of behavior became the foundation for the contemporary discipline of behavior analysis, whose professional organization, the Association for Behavior Analysis International, currently has over 5,000 members in the United States and 13,000 members in affiliated chapters around the world. Numerous behavior analytic journals carry on the Skinnerian tradition. You can even become a certified Skinnerian — a board-certified behavior analyst.

For all of these reasons, Skinner is a notable figure in the history of psychological science. But it is clear that Skinner's historical significance transcends simple disciplinary eminence. I would propose that for all of his contributions to psychology, Skinner should perhaps more appropriately be placed in the long line of utopian thinkers who have tried to imagine what a better world would look like. In Skinner's case, he also offered some tools to build it. Too bad he just couldn't convince enough of us to take them up.