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What was B.F. Skinner really like? A new study parses his traits

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March 20th marks the birthday of famed behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner, who would have turned 108 today. Besides Sigmund Freud, B.F. Skinner was the most famous and perhaps the most influential psychologist of the 20th century. But his own "radical behaviorism"—the idea that behavior is caused solely by environmental factors, never by thoughts or feelings—made him a magnet of controversy, which grew even more intense with the publication of his best-known book, Beyond Freedom & Dignity.

"He was looked at as beyond the pale by a lot of other psychologists, including me," says Dean Keith Simonton, a psychologist at the University of California Davis, who was a graduate student at Harvard when Skinner taught there. Some even called Skinner a fascist for his radical views of human malleability. But, says Simonton, "people who knew him would also say, 'You really should talk to Skinner, because he's a much broader, more open person than you think.'"

Who was B.F. Skinner? University of Oslo psychologists Geir Overskeid and Cato Grønnerød, along with Simonton, used a variety of source material plus an instrument that scores people on five major personality factors, to describe him and compare him with other eminent scientists. The study, which appears in Perspectives in Psychological Science, a journal published by the Association for Psychological Science, reveals a complex man—but nothing like the monster his detractors called him.

To draw an objective picture of Skinner, the psychologists first combed

through published sources both biographical and autobiographical, archival material, and sketches written by people who knew him. From these they culled 118 descriptive words and phrases, from "fanatic" to "afraid of the police." Five raters blind to the subject's identity categorized each descriptor under the Big Five traits that psychologists use to describe personality—Openness, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Extroversion, and Neuroticism—and assigned to the descriptor a degree from -2 to +2. The authors chose the 81 descriptors on which four of the five raters agreed; there was almost complete agreement as to degree.

The results: Skinner was highly conscientious—scoring 1.8—working tirelessly and meticulously toward ambitious goals. Indeed, he wrote that he aimed to remake the "entire field of psychology" and viewed relaxation as dangerous. And those Harvard students were right about Skinner's openness to experience. Besides being a psychologist, he painted, wrote a novel, played saxophone and piano, and enjoyed all kinds of music. He was also somewhat neurotic and extroverted: known as charming, funny—and a womanizer.

In many respects, Skinner's is the profile of an eminent scientist—for his drive and discipline, creative versatility, and also for his neuroticism, a trait shared by as many as 45% of leading scientists, according to one analysis. What the profile does not represent: an evil authoritarian. "This article makes Skinner more human," says Simonton—not just a "consolidation" of traits but also an array of nuanced detail. Though objective, it's not "a polarizing treatment. You don't have to love or hate him."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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