

Behaviorist, publicist and social critic: the evolution of John B. Watson

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Abstract

During the 1920s and early 1930s John B. Watson became a successful “advertising man” and a prolific writer in popular magazines. Knowing that controversy was an effective tool for gaining public attention, he advocated extreme positions on child care and family life that contributed to making behaviorism popular, but also alienated him from academic psychologists. Over time his social criticism became stronger to the point that his last article “Why I Don’t Commit Suicide” was rejected by several magazines and did not come out until being published in this same issue of the *Revista de Historia de la Psicología*.

This article describes Watson’s evolution from the 1913 behaviorist manifesto to this posthumous writing. Emphasis is laid on his attempts to make psychology useful to the general public and business, as well as his critique of marriage, university, religion, and politics, among other social institutions, especially with regard to the lack of challenging values. Although no definitive conclusion can be reached, Watson’s bitter social criticism seems to relate to unfair treatment from a puritanical society and from his colleagues in psychology who did not fully understand his situation after he was forced to resign his chair at John Hopkins University.

Keywords: behaviorism, John B. Watson, marriage, suicide.

Resumen

Durante las décadas de 1920 y 1930, John B. Watson trabajó con éxito la publicidad y escribió muchos artículos en revistas populares. Consciente de la eficacia de la controversia para conseguir publicidad, defendió posiciones extremas sobre la educación infantil y la familia que contribuyeron a la popularidad del conductismo pero le granjearon la antipatía de los psicólogos académicos. Con el paso del tiempo, su crítica social se agudizó hasta el punto de que su último artículo “Por qué no me suicido” fue rechazado por varias revistas y no salió a la luz pública hasta ahora que lo publicamos en este número de la *Revista de Historia de la Psicología*.

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El artículo describe la evolución de Watson desde el manifiesto conductista de 1913 hasta este escrito póstumo. Se pone especial atención en sus esfuerzos por hacer la psicología útil para el público general y para la empresa en particular, así como en sus críticas al matrimonio, universidad, religión, y política, entre otras instituciones, especialmente en lo que respecta a la falta de valores de la sociedad de su tiempo.

Aunque no puede llegarse a ninguna conclusión definitiva, el pesimismo de Watson parece deberse al trato injusto recibido de una sociedad puritana y también a la incomprensión de los psicólogos que no supieron hacerse cargo de su situación después de la renuncia forzosa a la cátedra de la Universidad John Hopkins.

Palabras clave: conductismo, John B. Watson, matrimonio, suicidio.

Last year marked the one hundredth anniversary of John B. Watson's behaviorist manifesto at Columbia University in New York. A charismatic personality, rebellious and defiant of authority, John B. Watson (1878-1958) was one of the most promising psychologists of his generation. He became president of the American Psychological Association when he was only 37 years old, and five years later, in 1920, was forced to leave academia just when reaching the pinnacle of his career. In the brief period of two decades, Watson gave psychology new impetus and direction under the banner of objectivity and behavior control.

Immediately after resigning from his chair at the prestigious Johns Hopkins University, Watson joined the NYC advertising agency of J. Walter Thompson, and his contributions to advertising brought him prominence and wealth. He started from below, surveying the American rubber boots market along the Mississippi River, as he remembered in his autobiography: "I was green and shy but soon learned to pull doorbells ... in order to ask what brand of rubber boots was worn by the family" (Watson, 1936, p.279).

In 1935, Watson lost his wife Rosalie Rayner after a short illness and left the J. Walter Thompson agency for the William Esty Company. Withdrawn from social life from that time on, he retired in 1945 and spent the last years of his life in a country house that reminded him of his childhood home. Detached from psychology and forgotten by psychologists, he took care of his animals and puttered in his garden until his death on September 25, 1958.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Watson became a much demanded writer in popular magazines, presenting his behaviorist psychology to the general public in a clear, direct and readable style. Using controversy as an effective tool for advertising, he gained public attention with shocking statements on child education and family life that alienated him from academic psychologists but contributed to the spreading of behaviorism among the general public.

In his later writings, however, Watson became increasingly critical of the social, political, academic and religious institutions of the country to the point that his last article “Why I Don’t Commit Suicide” was rejected by several magazines and remained unpublished until now. These facts, together with his late concern for suicide, are intriguing and have been the subject of much speculation among scholars.

There is evidence to suggest that in 1932 and early 1933 Watson was depressed and possibly even suicidal (Cohen, 1979; Hannush, 1987). Moreover, his son William took his life a few years later and his daughter Mary attempted suicide on more than one occasion during her long life (Hartley, 1990). However, the immediate reason for his interest in suicide seems to be the high number of people who took their lives after the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange and the attention given to this in the media.

The pessimism that permeates his later writings has to do with many factors, both personal and social. In order to gain a better understanding, we will discuss the evolution of his ideas on education, family and marriage, as well as his critique of American society, especially with regard to the lack of challenging values. All of these matters will be examined and placed in the context of Watson’s life, work and career.

THE BEHAVIORIST MANIFESTO

John B. Watson earned his PhD in psychology from Chicago University with a dissertation on Animal Learning (1903), which, according to Donald A. Dewsbury, “deserves recognition as a classic in development psychobiology” (Dewsbury, 1994, p.143). On receiving his degree, he worked with James R. Angell (1869-1949), co-director of his doctoral dissertation and head of the department of psychology. His animal learning experiments earned him a well-deserved reputation as a rigorous scientific and skilful experimentalist.

In 1908, he accepted the chair of experimental and comparative psychology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and the directorship of the laboratory. Five years later, on February 24, 1913, he proclaimed the birth of a new school of psychology in a lecture known as the behaviorist manifesto, published in the March issue of the *Psychological Review* (Watson 1913a). This was the first in a series of lectures on animal psychology organized at Columbia University by James McKeen Cattell (1860-1944), director of the department of psychology at Columbia.

The first part of the manifesto was a fierce criticism of introspective psychology because of its failure to develop like an undisputed natural science, as demonstrated by the recent controversy over imageless thought that had caused heated discussions in Europe and the United States (Bühler, 1907, Titchener, 1909, Wundt, 1907).

The most qualified representative of this psychology was Edward B. Titchener (1867-1927), leader of the structuralist school at the University of Cornell, who, as Watson said, was the one who “fought most bravely in this country for a psychology based on introspection” (Watson 1913a, p. 164). The behaviorist did not want to leave psychology in the hands of this Englishman established in the US, as he confessed in a letter to his friend Robert Means Yerkes (Watson, 1913, April 7).

The functionalistic psychologists headed by Watson’s mentor James R. Angell also were the subject of criticism. They led the opposition to Titchener’s structuralism, but their experiments did not differ substantially in spite of differences in terminology. In addition, they could not escape contradiction when postulating psychophysical parallelism in the mind-body problem, but defining consciousness as an instrument for adjustment, which implied Cartesian interactionism. According to Watson, behaviorism was the only consistent and logical functionalism because it avoided the philosophical problem of mind.

These criticisms were followed by the outline of a theory based on two fundamental facts: a) organism adjustment to environment by means of heredity and habit; and b) behavior as determined by environmental stimuli. From this it followed that the goal of psychology was to predict and control the behavior of organisms instead of analyzing consciousness. Having stated his position, Watson talked on methodology in rather general terms because he could not offer any specific method for studying the processes of feelings and thinking.

Watson was impressed by the large attendance, between 150 and 200 people (Watson, 1913, March, 12). However, his proposal was not received with general applause, especially from the psychological establishment, reluctant to give up consciousness and introspection without getting anything in return except vague promises regarding a better future. It would be the great “silent majority” of psychologists working in the areas of application who gave their support to behaviorism, among other reasons, because by breaking down the traditional division between theoretical and applied science, Watson allowed them to become scientists in their daily practice (O’Donnell, 1985; Samelson, 1981).

BEHAVIORISM BECOMES A HUMAN PSYCHOLOGY

After launching his program, Watson proceeded to implement it with the energy and vigor that characterized his undertakings. He wrote an excellent comparative psychology textbook, *Behavior: An Introduction to Comparative Psychology* (Watson, 1914), which included a chapter on language and thought under the pretext that therein lay the main difference between human beings and animals.

The prediction and control of human behavior was extremely difficult, if not impossible, given its complexity. It seemed more practical to experiment with children,

whose behaviors were easier to observe and control in the laboratory. For this reason, in April 1916, Watson left the animal laboratory and moved to a laboratory created for this purpose in the Phipps Psychiatric Clinic of Johns Hopkins by Dr. Adolf Meyer (1866-1950), director of the clinic.

The observation of child behaviors resulted in the well-known theory of the three basic emotions of fear, anger and love, which stated that most adult emotional reactions were acquired through conditioning and did not belong to the organism's hereditary endowment (Watson and Morgan, 1917).

The influence of Meyer is also apparent in Watson's interest in psychoanalysis, which sometimes goes unnoticed because of the outspoken criticism of Freud's theory in his later writings (Burnham, 1994; Gondra, 1985; Rilling, 2000). Watson was one of the few experimental psychologists who understood Freud's work and had the courage to speak up for him (Bergman, 1956). While working on his doctoral dissertation, he suffered an anxiety neurosis which, as he wrote, "was one of my best experiences in my university course. It taught me to watch my step and in a way prepared me to accept a large part of Freud, when I first began to get really with acquainted him around 1910" (Watson, 1936, p. 274).

Recognizing the relevance of Freud's insights, Watson tried to translate them into the language of stimulus and response in order to construct a general system of behavior. Moreover, in his dealings with psychiatrists he became convinced of the need to strengthen the position of psychologists versus psychiatrists, who gradually were gaining ground in psychological clinics due to the growing influence of psychoanalysis.

In addition to collaborating in the psychology course for medical students organized by Adolf Meyer (Watson, 1912), Watson published two major articles on Freud's theory, dealing with neurosis and unfulfilled desires respectively (Watson, 1916b, 1916c). His view of repression as the result of a conflict between antagonistic systems of habits came under tough criticism from Meyer because it did not take into account the complexity of clinical symptoms (Leys, 1984), but it did anticipate many notions of modern behavior therapy. The article on unfulfilled wishes gave a positive view of Freudian *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud, 1901/1914), and pointed out the possible contributions of psychoanalytic therapy to the study of personality.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Watson interrupted his work at the university to serve in the Committee on Classification of Personnel in the Army. After being discharged in 1918, he published his first major book, *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* (Watson, 1919). One year later, in February 1920, he made public the results of his "Little Albert" experiment on conditioned fear of a white rat in a human infant (Watson and Rayner, 1920).

Just when he had attained the first experimental proof of his theory, Watson's academic career came to an abrupt end because of his affair with his research assistant,

Rosalie Rayner, and the sensational press coverage of the divorce from his wife, Mary Ickes. Finally, in October of 1920, he was forced to resign as head of the Johns Hopkins department of experimental psychology. Realizing that the academic world was closed to him, he resolved to go into commercial work (Brewer, 1991).

Watson contacted Stanley Resor, president of the New York City advertising agency J. Walter Thompson Company, who advised him to begin by doing some field work. His first assignment was to survey the American rubber boots market in the southern United States. After that, during the first half of 1921, Watson went through every department of the J. Walter Thompson Co. to become acquainted with the business world; he then spent the summer at Macy's department store in New York City observing buyers' behavior because he wanted to gain first-hand experience of the American consumer, who henceforth would be his main object of study.

SELLING BEHAVIORISM TO THE PUBLIC

After leaving college, Watson did not break all ties with academia. From 1922-1926, he delivered weekly lectures at New York's New School for Social Research and attended several scientific meetings. Probably the best known of these gatherings was the debate with one of his staunchest opponents, William McDougall (1871-1938), held in February 1924 at the Psychological Club of Washington, DC (Watson and McDougall, 1928).

In 1924, Watson mailed the last two articles to be published in a scientific journal to the *Psychological Review*. The first dealt with the unconscious, defined in terms of non-verbalized behaviors (Watson, 1924a), and the second article presented a new version of his theory of thinking which included not only subvocal speech but also the implicit movements of motor and emotional organizations (Watson, 1924b). He also found time to supervise the experiments of Mary C. Jones (1896-1987) on the elimination of children's fears with a deconditioning procedure that anticipated the modern technique of systematic desensitization (Jones, 1924). But his most influential contributions had to do with the books and articles he wrote for the general public.

The lectures delivered at the People's Institute were published in his best-selling book, *Behaviorism* (Watson, 1925, 1930a), in which he presented a substantially different version of his behavior theory (Logue, 1994). Adopting an extreme environmentalist position, Watson rejected the concept of instinct and reduced the biological organism to the condition of a simple reflex machine. Giving up the strict scientific viewpoint adopted in the manifesto, he presented behaviorism as the foundation of future experimental ethics destined to transform the universe; "For the universe," he wrote, "will change if you bring up your children, not in the freedom of the libertine,

but in behavioristic freedom – a freedom which we cannot even picture in words, so little do we know of it” (Watson, 1925, p. 248).

It may seem strange that a determinist like Watson could speak of a behavioristic freedom in such vague and undefined terms; but the scientist had given way to the advertising man trying to sell behaviorism to the public. His ability to combine his scientific authority with the straightforward language of advertising had turned him into a powerful propagandist.

Encouraged by the success of the book (Carpintero, 2004), Watson wrote many articles on psychological subjects in popular magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, *McCall's*, *Collier's*, *Liberty*, *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, etc. The articles published in *Harper's* were compiled in a book titled *The Ways of Behaviorism* (Watson, 1928) and the series on child care from *McCall's* and *Cosmopolitan* became the core of *Psychological Care of the Infant and Child* (Watson and Watson, 1928). This book was extremely popular in spite of Watson's stern regulatory system of child rearing, which deprecated petting and other displays of affection by parents in order to avoid undue attachment preventing growth as an independent person.

In another paper (Watson, 1929, June 29), Watson imagined a Utopian society ruled by scientific principles and totally free from ideologies, religion or politics, where people looked after behavioristic happiness for themselves and their children (Morawski, 1982). In this society, mothers never knew the identity of their own child, and children changed homes every four weeks until they had passed through the hands of all 260 mothers belonging to the same unit. The reason for this was that the home unduly prolonged the period of infancy.

Although Utopia was ruled according to the principles of science, its social organization was predominantly sexist, with men performing the most important jobs and women reduced to housework. These extremely conservative ideas, together with Watson's criticisms of American mothers and his attacks on militant suffragists who, in his experience, had never made a sex adjustment (Watson 1927, July 6), generated adverse reactions among psychologists and more educated public. However; his belief that the environment could be arranged to shape someone's future development struck a responsive chord with many Americans (Goodwin, 2008).

OPENING DOORS TO INDUSTRIAL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Watson's career in business was as successful as his college career. Promoted to the Vice-Presidency of the J. Walter Thomson Company in 1925, he contributed to personnel selection, training of employees and vendors, marketing, and major publicity campaigns, such as those of Lucky Strike cigarettes, Johnson and Johnson's Baby Powder, Pond's Cream and Maxwell House coffee, among others popular products. His

main contribution to consumer psychology had to do with the application of scientific thinking to the areas of marketing rather than with the creation of new advertisement methods, as authorized studies have shown conclusively (Buckley, 1982; Coon, 1994; Kreshel, 1990). However, his efforts to open the industrial field to psychologists are not so well known and deserve further consideration.

As a member of the board of directors of the Psychological Corporation, Watson collaborated with this nonprofit organization since its foundation in 1921 by James McKeen Cattell. Among other things, he wrote the foreword to *The New Psychology of Selling and Advertising*, a book by Henry C. Link, then secretary of the Psychological Corporation of New York, and heartily praised his use of scientific methods to discover consumer reactions.

Watson worked hard to persuade businessmen that they needed psychologists for a better understanding of public reaction to their products. For instance, in 1921, in an address to the Associated Dress Industries of America, he introduced himself as follows:

I think my only right to speak on such a subject comes from the fact that all through my experience in psychology and in advertising I have been an observer of human nature. I believe that most of our problems are to be settled by observing human beings and I think this applies to the dress industry as well as to all other industries (Watson, 1921, p. 1).

The scientific study of consumer needs and wants was the only procedure that could carry industries safely through times of crisis such as the failure of the American dress industry by selling the long skirts and dresses designed by Paris dressmakers. Apparently, they had overlooked that American women saw no reason why if they had good looking legs they might not decently show them. The resulting economic loss could have been prevented had they hired psychologists, whose investigation, Watson said, “would have enabled you to get at the wants and desires of your market and guarded you against such pitfalls” (Watson, 1921, p. 6).

The following year, in an address to the American Association of Office Managers held in Washington D.C., Watson asked his audience for a renewed faith in psychology, a faith which, he said, “must show itself in your willingness to attach a psychologist to your staff” (Watson, 1922, May 18, w. p.).

In another talk to the J. Walter Thompson people on “Getting Hold of the Consumer,” he included the “habit drives” in the list of needs that led consumers to buy a particular product. Habit drives, such as smoking, were so embedded in our organization that we were unable to tell the stimulus that made us react so strongly.

Watson had performed an experiment with blindfolded subjects and found that there was no basis for the insistence on a given brand grounded upon differences in the

sight of the smoke, smell, taste, and touch (Watson, 1922). Since heavy smokers could not distinguish one brand from another, it was necessary to appeal to other factors in order to enhance the loyalty to a particular brand. Therefore, concluded Watson:

If my excursion into psychology has brought any result, it is this: To get reaction from your consumer, tell him something that will tie up with fear, something that will stir up a mild rage, that will call out an affectionate or love response, or strike at a deep physiological or habit need. Only our ability limits us in the use of these powerful genii of psychology (Watson, 1922, n.d., p.19).

These paragraphs perfectly summed up Watson's use of psychology in advertising. He tried to manipulate consumers' motives and emotions, instead of rational thoughts, in order to control their buying behavior. The marketing of goods depended mostly upon the stimulation of desire (Coon, 1994).

“MEN WON'T MARRY FIFTY YEARS FROM NOW”

With the passage of time Watson's criticism of family life became more radical, especially after reading G.V. Hamilton and K. MacGowan's *What is Wrong with Marriage* (1929), a book that in his opinion was “the best approach and the most objective approach we have so far to the study of marriage” (Watson, 1929, xiv).

Hamilton and MacGowan took a group of one hundred men and one hundred women, all of them married but not necessarily to someone in the study group, and asked four hundred questions about their marital life. Their major finding was that thirty-six men and forty-one women had hopeless marriages and only twenty-nine men and twenty-one women were unequivocally successfully married. The rest of them were successfully married but with qualifications.

The study also showed that chances for success in marriage were increased as men and women married later in life, at least up to age thirty-five, while the group of women married before twenty-five was the unhappiest of all. With respect to marital unhappiness, the main reason given was temperamental dissatisfaction; sexual dissatisfaction came next, followed by lack of personal freedom and jealousy.

Watson, however, thought that the most startling fact brought out in the book had to do with extra-marital sex: women married during the decade prior to the study were more experimental than men. He took this fact as evidence that extramarital experimentation was becoming general and started campaigning against the institution of marriage.

In a provocative paper published in the June 1929 issue of *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan Magazine* under the title “Men won't marry fifty years from now,” he began by painting the modern woman as a “huntress of men”:

Her arrows are sharp and keen. Her bow carries far. She brings her quarry within range by song and athletics, by swimming and dancing. She uses frankincense and myrrh, cleansing cream and finishing cream. She rouges her kips and powders her cheeks (Watson, 1929, June, p.71).

There was a sharp contrast between this modern “Diana” and married women ten years before, where eighty percent had never learned to make a sex adjustment. Since these women were not interested in their husbands except conventionally, they leaned to experimentation with other wives’ husbands and with bachelors. The married man, Watson argued, was doubly hunted – hunted by the 20,000,000-odd married women who were not successfully married, and hunted by a large percentage of the 1,250,000 flappers who reached the age of eighteen every year.

These facts indicated that staying married was becoming a tough job for men and women. Although a growing number of them were fed up with each other, they could not end their relationship because it was forbidden by law. Watson wondered why this prohibition, since in ancient times there were so many different kinds of family life, such as monogamy, polyandry, polygamy, infant marriages, or group wives. It was only under the influence of the Christian era that marriage slowly began to emerge as a kind of mystical union of one male and one female. But the rising number of divorcees indicated that something was changing in our society. As Watson wrote:

Men and women facing these figures will make up their minds – possible before my fifty years are up – that marriage is obsolete and wasteful of our few short years of happiness. They will form temporary unions and stick to them as long as they are happy (Watson, 1929, June, p. 106).

Going into the world of practical actions, Watson had no further suggestions to offer because the primary basis for marriage was gone in the big cities. The only thing that could be done was to facilitate divorce the way it was done in Sweden. This procedure would at least make the retreat from marriage an orderly one. But, perhaps not quite happy with the current state of things, Watson ended the article as follows:

I think it is too bad the institution will not work more generally. I should be willing to see us all go back to frontier life where a wife is really needed. I should like to see us study carefully the few happy marriages we know about so we could learn the recipe for being happily married. I don’t think there is a real solution for the rank and file of people and I still don’t believe men will marry fifty years from now (Watson, 1929, June, p.106).

Despite all his criticisms, Watson somehow seems to miss the happy marriages of earlier times.

THE HOME, AN OBSOLETE INSTITUTION

Watson continued his critique of family in the chapter he wrote for a book edited by V.C. Calverton, a radical left-wing writer, with an introduction by Bertrand Russell and the collaboration of prominent figures like Havelock Ellis, Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, Wilhelm Stekel, Lewis Terman and Fritz Wittels, among others (Watson, 1930b).

The chapter began with another indicator that American family life in large cities was on the wane, namely, the increasing number of boys' and girls' camps which took children away from the home. In Watson's opinion, "The movement to take children out of the home is probably one of the swiftest growing movements in the history of social customs" (Watson, 1930b, p.55).

Since children were leaving the home, wives were spending daily only a few scant hours there, and men were always away, the home had become an obsolete institution. It was only a place to change one's clothes, to have cocktails before going out for dinner, and to spend a few hours in sleep.

Seeking information about the origin of the family unit, Watson checked books on primitive society and found their authors so imbued with religion and morality that they could not offer an objective point of view. The only book he mentioned was *The History of Human Marriage* (Westermarck, 1901), and only to reject the notion of an instinct for monogamy, despite agreeing with the idea that monogamy was the original form of living together between man and woman.

According to Watson, the origin of the family unit had to be found in the hunger for sex of two individuals of the opposite sex. The primitive pair of mates found that by living together in a cave they could engage in sexual intercourse without the interference of other males and females. Thus mating was the first step in the formation of the family unit, before any kind of religious or moral belief.

Prior to marriage, this ideal situation was not at odds with sexual freedom. Apparently, boys and girls played sex without selection, but when they approached puberty the experimentation became more serious. Finally, when one boy and one girl established a successful relation, they became conditioned upon each other.

After the intense period of sexual conditioning, habits of reacting to each other developed which could be called *collateral conditionings*. These non-sexual ways of relating arose from the fact that they lay together for sex, but they were not strictly a part of sex. They had to do with mutual preparation of food – and mutual help in time of sickness.

POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS “BALLYHOO”

This ideal family situation did not last longer. The fear of enemies, other tribes or wild beasts led individuals to form groups in order to protect themselves against such dangers. But this group organization was detrimental to the sexual and collateral conditioning between pairs, leading to physical contacts with other people, with the resulting competition between males and females. To avoid sex-related difficulties, as well as problems of property relationships, group-sanctioned regulations emerged.

If the laws had been quickly discarded or changed as conditions changed, little harm would have resulted from this kind of control. But the regulations outlived their usefulness and became tribal customs handed down from the old to the new generation. Eventually they ceased to have any bearing upon group problems, but because of their age-old tradition and the people's reverence for them, the regulations took on such blind acceptance that they became basically religious.

Medicine men and lawyers became the interpreters of these customs, observances and mysteries. Working through the easily-aroused fears of the people, they found that they could strengthen their hand by telling them that there was an unseen god supporting their temporal power. This political and religious organized “ballyhoo,” as Watson called it, came to exert all-powerful control upon the fearful individual, and thus upon the family. As a consequence of early education in kindergartens and churches, wrote Watson:

Religious mummery is seared into the children's very flesh from outside families... The child is forced to put on a mass of refined voodoo customs antedating the Bible or the Koran, by a hundred million years, carried on by childlike parents and forced upon each successive crop of children, generations without end (Watson, 1930b, p.63).

When children went to school they were swathed with non-religious bandages equally thick and tight. They had to learn disciplines which were out of line with the human needs of the day, and the moral bondages were fed to them as a series of verbal stimuli that were not tied in with daily behavior. Such teaching turned them into a kind of verbally-controlled automaton as these Christians who love their neighbors on Sunday but take the bread from the mouth of a child on Monday.

To these moral precepts, Watson went on, was added the bandage of sex superstition that hampers the behavior of the individual. Very soon the child learns that he must play with neither his own sex organs nor those of any other child. As boys get older, they are told that manipulation of the organ leads to insanity and girls are told that the hymen is the symbol of virtue that must be jealously guarded.

Watson thought that this bandaging was impervious to any intellectual approach despite lacking any scientific foundation. He wrote:

As I grow older and realize that nothing can be done about it... Being so it seems tragic to have to admit that the world is largely made up of shackled individuals, top-heavy because they are verbally moral, religious and patriotic automatons determined utterly in their daily conduct by family training that could function only at the level of the emergence of civilization (Watson, 1930b, p. 66).

Younger generations, however, were gradually throwing aside the shackles that bound them. They were eagerly absorbing the movies, sex novels, and literature of sane living, and began experimenting in sex on a scale which would terrify their parents if they knew it. This bloodless revolt was leading inevitably, Watson concluded, "to the early abandonment of the home in everything but in name" (Watson, 1930b, p. 68).

Watson dared also to predict the changes that would occur in the near future. There would be more sexual freedom and mating between anatomically and physiologically adjusted individuals. There would be no idea of sin or obligation regarding married couples, and no pressure would be exerted upon them by the church or state or mates' respective families.

Moreover, there would be important developments in child rearing, such as institutions under the management of behavioristically trained physicians and nurses at which children would learn to achieve total mastery of their behavior.

On February 21, 1930, Watson stated these views in a lecture at the University of Princeton, once the center of the old psychology of faculties. Always ready to defy authority, in an interview published that same day in the newspaper of the University, the *Daily Princetonian*, he proclaimed the end of the home. The editor's response came in an editorial entitled "God bless our homes," which attributed Watson's behavioristic "benders" to something that had gone wrong in his environment, namely, a change in his rate of metabolism by the seasonal scarcity of vegetables.

COPING WITH SUICIDE

On April 24, 1932, the journalist Crowell Bowen (1905-1971) interviewed Watson on the reasons for the suicide of five eminent personalities from business and published it under the sensationalistic headline of "Rich Men Over 50 Kill Selves for Lack of Woman Attention!" (Bowen, 1932, p.7)

Leaving aside his previous forecast that nobody would marry in fifty years, Watson stated that "a man ought to get married when he reaches the age of 45 or 50. At that age he will find a wife to be a psychological necessity" (Bowen, 1932, p.7). This change

was due to the fact that all wealthy suicides examined by him were either bachelors or widowers or separated from their wives, from which he concluded that loneliness was what brought them to end their lives. The wife was a necessity for them because they needed a mother in their declining years when they were going back to childhood. Moreover, she supplied them the audience they craved and the social group they were about to lose.

The following year, Watson started his article on suicide, which would be the last research he conducted in his life. In order to understand the reasons why men and women kept living despite the difficulties they encountered in life, in March 1913 he sent the following letter to some of his friends and colleagues:

I think we are not giving the youths of the country quite enough encouragement. They can't get jobs now and they haven't very much in front of them in black and white to make them want to go on living. I am preparing a popular article for *Cosmopolitan* on "Why I Don't Commit Suicide." I want to build up the positive side quite strongly.

I'm asking a group of friends to write me a fifty word personal statement on "Why I Don't Commit Suicide." Will you do this for me (Watson, 2014, pp. 42-43).

It is worth mentioning Watson's concern for the great number of young people without jobs as a consequence of the Great Depression of 1929, as well as his purpose of "building up the positive side" of the problem, which, nonetheless, is in sharp contrast with the pessimistic tone of the article.

A total amount of 283 responses were registered, belonging to college professors, psychiatrists, eminent lawyers and actors, businessmen, Junior League women, and some hundred and fifty college freshmen whose collaboration was requested by their professor. But before proceeding to analyze them, Watson wrote a long introduction with a bitter criticism not only of family and marriage, as in earlier writings, but also of American life and the crisis in modern society.

LACK OF CHALLENGING VALUES

In the first pages of Watson's article we find interesting changes of opinion about relevant issues. For instance, when dealing with the causes of suicide, Watson has no problem referring to a psychosocial illness, or as he wrote, "A disease – a psychological disease – coming from certain social causes" (Watson, 2014, p. 38).

In his opinion, the role of financial loss after the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange had been overemphasized, since the trend of suicides went steadily upward during the prosperous 1920s and became one of the most pressing problems for public health.

Strangely enough, Watson seems to admit the notion of psychological disease – depression – although in a radio talk on “psychology as a background for life” he qualified the expression by speaking of the “so-called ‘mental’ troubles” (Watson, 1933, April 19, p. 5). Nevertheless, given all his considerations on depression, we have to recognize an important change with respect to his earlier criticism of mental illness (Watson, 1916b, 1927). Now Watson thinks that many of the deaths could have been avoided if the depressed person had had the opportunity to go over his case with a competent psychologist or psychiatrist.

The ultimate reason for the rising tide of suicides seemed to lie in the crisis of values affecting modern life. That financial loss was not the main determining factor was demonstrated by the fact that more than 1/3 of the total deaths occurred between the ages of 25 and 44 years. It was in the early prime of life where most of the people took off their lives, and this was because society did not offer them enough interesting values to make them to want to live in difficult times. As Watson wrote:

It has been my belief for a long time that society today is not offering to its members enough values of an interesting kind to make people who are in a jam for any reason want to take the trouble to life. Especially is this true of the younger generation (Watson, 2014, p. 38).

By the way, this appeal to values is in sharp contrast to the popular image of Watson as an amoral human being devoid of all consciousness. As can be seen throughout the text, the founder of behaviorism is deeply concerned for the lack of challenging goals and values in the youth of that time.

There is also another important change in Watson’s thinking, namely, his admission of neglect of social factors in the behaviorist education he had designed for his own children. As the article continues,

We have on the past few decades been building a different kind of youth. Behaviorism has done what it could to further the youth movement. It has been demanding that young people be freed from the traditional bondage of the home – from undue attachments to parents –, and that he be taught to face himself, his own weaknesses – freed from self-adulation, self-pity, and dependencies of social heritage... But I am afraid we have overlooked one thing. We haven’t changed the world to receive these new individuals. This was one of the important things I overlooked in trying to raise my own youngsters solely along behavioristic lines (Watson, 2014, pp. 38-39).

Watson is sorry for not having taken into account the impact of society in education when theorizing, and he goes on to blame the university for its failure to offer

youth an environment in which they could address problems encountered later in life. When they left college, they could not find a job due to soaring unemployment; or if they managed to find one, salaries were so low that marriage was almost impossible for them. Hence their discouragement and lack of responsibility in their work; this was not their fault, but rather that of the university and the rest of the social environment created for them.

Watson's critique turns next to country, family and religion, social institutions that formerly captured the emotions of the youth. He believes that patriotism and hero worship were on the wane at a time in society when everybody and everything was looked upon with suspicion. Family no longer offered the encouraging environment it once did nor was there anything to replace it.

The Church, which formerly offered a stable and enduring set of values, no longer appealed to the fear of punishment, or the hope of any immediate reward. Marriage had also lost its former appeal; there was little excitement about it, little glamour, as the divorce records proved. Hence the tendency for the young to think that there was no mystery, no charm, and no kick in life anymore.

Faced with such a grim picture, Watson only can find relief in science, the unique value which, in his opinion, has suffered little or no deflation. Thus he writes that "There is real romance in Chemistry, Physics and Biology" (Watson, 2014, p. 41), although acknowledging that science too is unable to arouse much enthusiasm among university students.

To conclude this long preliminary section, Watson compares life ahead in graduate school with the Indian lad before civilization smothered him, a human being who eagerly expects to be recognized as a man of the tribe and loses himself completely in the vicissitudes of everyday life. This plunge into activity was for the behaviorist the surest way to attain happiness and self-fulfillment, and it was missing in those times of social crisis.

HELPING PEOPLE THINKING OF SUICIDE

Against this background, Watson introduces the survey's findings by proudly stating that "Here, for the first time, I believe, in history, is set down the motives of why people go on living" (Watson, 2014, p. 43). The results, however, were not as expected.

Watson hoped to get a wealth of positive material on why one should fight to live, but as a matter of fact, most of the responses were quite conventional and negative, without offering any real value for continuing life. Indeed many of them revealed a marked cynicism about life and the result would have been even worse if it had not been for the undergraduates and the junior league groups, which did set forth positive values like "enjoying life too much," "love of family," and "interest in what may happen just around the corner."

In the radio talk mentioned above, Watson explained this lack of enthusiasm for life by saying that “when the environment has been continually depressing for a period of years, everyone at one time or another turns evanescently or seriously to thoughts of suicide” (Watson, 1933, April 19, p.6). This affirmation could shed some light on his own experience with suicide, but the article does not say anything like that and quickly moves to the conclusion that modern society has failed to provide a healthy environment for young people. Watson continues to ask:

Doesn't this chart show more convincingly than I can tell it that we have neglected to prepare the world for the reception of oncoming adults? That we have in no way put into parables, precepts and examples reason for living? That we have been neglecting to make the stranger (the young adult) welcome in our midst? Indeed neglecting even to shape the world as to make a standard palace for starting him off? (Watson, 2014, p. 44)

Faced with such a critical situation, Watson demands drastic changes in the social environment. Using again the question form, he suggests modernizing the “medieval university,” making business more “glamorous,” purifying political life and making marriage enduringly “romantic.” It is worth noting the adjective “glamorous” with regard to business. Evoking buccaneers and pirates of times past, Watson advocates a reform of business as follows:

If we only had fifty men of their strengths of character in business today who would turn aside just a little from making money, to making their business a haven for training and encouraging their oncoming employees, business could become a stabilizing psychological factor for sanity (Watson, 2014, p. 45).

Finally, with respect to a more “romantic” marriage, Watson merely points out that “the task is herculean though and will require a generation or two of training”; he then concludes this section by complaining that “nobody today is trying to sell the youth the romance that lies in every kind of honest work” (Watson, 2014, p. 45).

These environmental changes take a substantial amount of time, while people on the verge of suicide require immediate assistance and help. Taking for granted that suicide takes place when the individual is in a depressed state, Watson proposes two different kinds of help, the first cognitive and the second behavioral.

In Watson's opinion, it is “inevitable that every normal person is depressed at one time or another” (Watson, 1933, April 19, p.6). When that happens, the person panics because he or she thinks that it will endure forever, and tries to get rid of it right away. These states of anxiety, however, endure for only a short time and the best thing one can do with them is to wait until they are over. Hence the advice of hanging fast to

the following thought: “never make a serious decision – *whether to change jobs, change husband or wife, or to commit suicide, when a depression state is on. Wait until you pull out of it – and you will pull out of it*” (Watson, 2014, p. 46).

This procedure, reminiscent of the “stop thinking” technique used by modern cognitive therapies, was also used a long time ago by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), who in his *Spiritual Exercises* wrote the following *Rule for Distinguishing Spiritual Influences*: “In a period of distress we are not to alter anything, but should remain firm and unyielding in our resolutions and the purpose of mind in which we found ourselves in the preceding comfort” (Loyola, 1548/2011, p.108). This coincidence of the behaviorist with an old teacher of spirituality may be surprising for those not familiar with this article, but the founder of behaviorism had evolved into less dogmatic positions and was much closer to the common sense wisdom which belongs to all times and places.

Watson’s second piece of advice for avoiding suicide is typically behaviorist: “Run away for a week, a month of a year. There is no psychological medicine so potent in the entire wide world as a *new environment*” (Watson, 2014, p. 46). But it does not seem as important as the former, since it is proposed as a last resort: “if you can’t get to someone you trust to talk the matter over with” (Watson, 2014, p. 46). Furthermore, he completely ignored it in the 1933 radio talk mentioned above.

CONCLUSION

Watson was deeply hurt when his article was refused for publication. Several years later, in 1950, he wrote:

I have no real answer as to why it was turned down. I amuse myself with the thought that the article was submitted just about the time Mr. Roosevelt has made democracy safe for himself, the non-voting population of the South, and for Mr. Stalin and his communists” (Watson, 1950, May, p.2).

This quote, written just at the beginning of McCarthy’s anticommunist crusade, has been interpreted as proof of Watson’s contempt for “New Deal” reforms (Buckley, 1989, p.166). However, it can also be understood on the basis of Watson’s personal enmity with Harold L. Ickes, secretary of the interior in the Roosevelt administrations and responsible for implementing much of the “New Deal.” Harold Ickes was the brother of Watson’s first wife, Mary Ickes, and there was a long history of fighting and misunderstandings between the two that might explain the ironic tone of the quote. The article was not published because it was too depressing and had a format that could hardly fit in a popular magazine like *Cosmopolitan*.

The reader will find obvious flaws in “Why I Don’t Commit Suicide.” The methodology used is poor; there is neither random sampling nor a representative group of the general population, but only introspective reports of friends. The language is quite traditional. Watson talks about goals, purposes and values in life; he considers depression as a mental disease despite his previous critique of the notion as used by doctors, and submits the testimony of a non-behaviorist psychiatrist as evidence of what is important for living. While addressing problems that have not yet been resolved, as evidenced by the rising number of divorces or the financial crisis of 2007, the proposed remedies are too simplistic and nostalgic, implying a longing for times past.

Furthermore, the article is not without contradictions. For instance, the admission that the survey’s better responses are those from college students does not match the criticism against the lack of values among the youngster.

However, despite all these failures, “Why I Don’t Commit Suicide” deserves further study if only for the changes in Watson’s thinking. His admission of failures in the education given to his children seems to agree with his later confession about *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*. In his autobiography, Watson regarded it as “another book I feel sorry about – not because of its sketchy form, but because I did not know enough to write the book I wanted to write. I feel that I had a right to publish it... since I planned never go back into academic work” (Watson, 1936, p.280).

Watson also regretted the popular articles he wrote. As he confessed in the same autobiographical writing:

I had learned how to write what the public would read, and, since there was no longer opportunity for me to publish in technical journals, I saw no reason why I should not go to the public with my wares. Yet these articles have brought criticism greater than the offense, I believe, from no less a person than President Angell of Yale. His Commencement Address at Dartmouth some years ago left me with no bitterness but rather with a poignant sadness. I just wonder whether he or other of my colleagues confronted with my situation would not have sold himself to the public (Watson 1936, pp. 280-281).

A person familiar with Watson, Mary C. Jones, wrote that “Had Watson continued his psychological observations... I am sure that his theoretical position would have become more dynamic, more mellow” (Jones, 1974, p.183). But Watson was forced into a position he did not seek or desire by a highly puritan society unable to separate private from public life. Forgotten by psychologists as well, he remained silent for the rest of his life. Those who criticize him should not forget that the founder of behaviorism was a victim of the social conventions of the time, and, one might say, of his iconoclastic personality.

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John B. Watson circa 1925. Old drawing, courtesy of the Archives of the History of American Psychology, Center for the History of Psychology, The University of Akron – the Cedric Larson papers.