Punishment in B. F. Skinner’s Works: Theory, experimental data and ethics.

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The concept of punishment and its use to decrease behavior are still a matter of controversy worldwide Inside Behavior Analysis, the field most identified with B. F. Skinner’s work. There are debates about what punishment does to behavior, about existing experimental data, and of course, about the ethics surrounding the use of punishment by parents, schools, and by those caring for persons with developmental disabilities. Debates not only involve the use of extreme procedures like shock, but also the use of mild punishments like verbal reprimands or disapproval. B. F. Skinner studied and discussed punishment and its effects during his lifetime. In his 60 years of work (1930-1990) his writings regarding punishment changed with respect to terminology and explanatory mechanisms. His work also showed a growing concern with social issues and the deleterious effects of punishment in society. Skinner disapproved of the use of punishment in personal relationships, education, government, religion, and animal training. This presentation presents Skinner’s views and their change over time, using as documents his published and unpublished works, and also shows how Skinner’s analysis of punishment is relevant to twenty-first century discussions.