John B. Watson's Advice on Child Rearing

Some Historical Context

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John B. Watson (1878-1958) wrote for the popular press on a number of topics during the 1920s, often in the area of child rearing. His facts about child development were not disputed, but his advice was often criticized. This paper examines the validity of the criticism by reviewing what Watson advised in the context of his day. We found that, although most of his advice was consistent with child rearing practices then and now (e.g., about child misbehavior, positive supports, prevention), some of it was not (e.g., about love and affection), although this latter advice was not unique to his day. We then comment on several sources of variance in this advice.

During the 1920s, John B. Watson (1878-1958), the founder of behaviorism, wrote for both the academic and the popular press, and gave public lectures on a variety of topics. Among the topics he addressed in the popular press was child rearing, where he provided advice about raising happy, well-adjusted children, equipped to function in modern society. Although his popular writings and lectures were generally acclaimed for making the new science of behavior accessible to the public, his child-rearing advice has often been criticized. The criticism, though, is problematic on two accounts. First, it is often based on selected aspects of his advice. Second, it is usually predicated on the norms of a more modern era, not those of Watson's day. In order to assess the validity of this criticism, we undertook a review of what Watson actually advised, the criticisms of his advice at the time, and how his advice compared and contrasted with other advice of the day. We speculate, as well, on some sources of the discrepancies in the advice found in that era.

Historical Context

Watson left academic psychology in 1920 and began a second career as an advertising executive, in which he was highly successful. However, he continued to make important contributions to psychology as a science and a discipline, and he began writing for the popular press. Indeed, as a contributor to *Harper's*, *McCall's*, and *Cosmopolitan* magazines, he became America's first "pop" psychologist. Some of these articles addressed psychology proper, while others addressed social issues of the day, for instance, the role of women in then-modern society (Watson, 1927d), the institution of marriage (Watson, 1929b), and of course child rearing.

Watson's first article on child rearing appeared in 1922 (Watson, 1922), his last one in 1929 (Watson, 1929a). In between, he published a series of six articles in *McCall's* (Watson, 1927a, 1927b, 1927c, 1928a, 1928b, 1928c) that -- with the assistance of his wife, Rosalie Rayner Watson – was expanded and published as their book, *Psychological Care of the Infant and Child* (Watson & Watson, 1928; on Watson's career, see Buckley, 1989; Cohen, 1979; Morris & Todd, 1999; Todd & Morris, 1994).

In the 1920s, Americans were looking to the new science of psychology and to studies in child development for advice about child rearing (Child Study Association, 1926; see Frank, 1962; Lomax, Kagan, & Rosenkrantz, 1978; Senn, 1975). Parenthood was increasingly viewed as a vocation that should be based on firm knowledge. Rather than relying on practices that came to them "naturally," parents began placing more emphasis on the application of scientific principles. They looked to science for innovative child-rearing methods, different from the previous generation's old-fashioned techniques (Stendler, 1950). Watson provided some of this advice for producing "children who would be able to cope with the realities of modern life" (Watson & Watson, 1928, p. 10). His primary message was that, within normal biological limits, children were made, not born, and that the responsibility for raising happy children fell squarely on their parents' shoulders. He was concerned with teaching parents how to produce a child "who finally enters manhood so bulwarked with stable work and emotional habits that no adversity can quite overwhelm him" (Watson & Watson, 1928, p. 10).

Watson's Child Rearing Advice

In *Psychological Care of the Infant and Child*, Watson and Watson (1928) described child rearing as a science, a science based in part on Watson's research on infant development at Johns Hopkins University (e.g., Watson, 1925a, 1925b, 1925c; Watson & Rayner, 1920); albeit not a science yet fully developed. Nonetheless, on the basis of this science, Watson offered child rearing advice on several topics, among them negative emotional reactions, misbehavior, love and affection, and daily routines.

Negative emotional reactions. Watson's advice about negative emotional reactions was that they be kept to a minimum by maintaining a positive, non-threatening home environment. As for children's fears, parents should, for example, protect their children from sudden, loud sounds and objects that could hurt them, but at the same time, they should not shelter children from normal noises. More proactively, he recommended establishing some common sense negative reactions to undesirable activity, such as reaching toward forbidden objects, but the number of these reactions was to be kept to a minimum. As for temper tantrums, Watson also emphasized prevention, advising parents to promote their children's independence at completing tasks that might otherwise cause tantrums, for instance, tasks related to bathing and dressing. Even then, Watson warned, children would still occasionally have tantrums, for no parent can control all the factors that produce them.

Misbehavior. On the topic of misbehavior, Watson again emphasized prevention. In particular, he advised parents to keep their children busy throughout the day, engaged in appropriate activities. Only when prevention was ineffective should punishment be used. But even then, punishment should be no more aversive than smartly rapping the child's fingers or hands with a pencil. Punishment was not generally advised.

Love and affection. In discussing love and affection, Watson made two points. First, love was not a broadly generalized instinctive pattern of behavior. In infants, it was a reaction that could only be brought about by one stimulus -- stroking the skin; later in development, associated stimuli would come to elicit this reaction. Second, love was a reaction that, if evoked too much or too often, would lead to overcoddling, which would later be manifest in adults who needed coddling. In addition, the excessive emotional attachment that overcoddling might engender could interfere with later marital adjustment. To guard against these outcomes, Watson and Watson (1928) advised the following:

> Let your behavior always be objective and kindly firm. Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit in your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say good night. Shake hands with them in the morning. Give them a pat on the head if they have made an extraordinarily good job of a difficult task. (pp. 81-82)

Also, to insure that children would be independent of any one adult's love and affection, parents should bring different nurses into their homes on a weekly basis. Comparable positive effects on children's independence might also be achieved by putting them in a fenced yard for large parts of the day. If parents wished to watch over their children on these latter occasions, they should do so inconspicuously. Children should be left to cope with and solve their own problems.

Daily routines. Watson especially emphasized the importance of establishing a daily routine. He acknowledged that no hard and fast rules were applicable to every family, but he did advise that a formal routine of daily activities could engender desirable habits, especially at bedtime, mealtime, and playtime (e.g., a half hour of quiet bedtime play). The importance of daily exercise and social contacts was also addressed. In general, Watson and Watson (1928) noted that daily routines provided children with the "nice habits, conventions, and customs" demanded by "polite society" (p. 113).

Criticisms of Watson's Advice

Although Watson's child-rearing advice was, in general, well received, his specific advice about love and affection often met with strong criticism, both then and now (Lomax et al., 1978, p. 131). In his own time, for instance, the Housewives' League was outraged. Its president, Mrs. Julian Heath, said that "Watson must be a very unhappy man to offer such ideas" (Cohen, 1979, p. 212). A woman attending one of Watson's public lectures said she was happy she had not heard of Watson's advice before raising her own children because she was then able to enjoy them (Cohen, 1979, p. 210). Pediatricians blamed Watson for an apparent increase in infant sleeping problems (Senn, 1975). Newspaper editorials referred to him as "subnormal" and "subhuman" (Cohen, 1979, p. 209). One columnist wrote that "the theorist should be 'backed against the wall and let him have it full force from the shoulder in plain speech that he is plainly wrong'" (quoted in Cohen, 1979, p. 212). When asked to assess Watson's influence on the study of children, the noted developmental psychologist, William Kessen, stated that "his impact on the field has been almost completely deleterious. His attitude toward children, his attitude toward parents in the psychological care of the child is, it seems to me, pathological" (Senn, 1975, p. 29).

In his critique of the mechanization of Western culture, Dell (1930) argued that Watson's child-rearing advice was factually in error, citing studies demonstrating that withholding parental affection can result in children's failure to grow and thrive. Moreover, according to Dell, Watson's advice was simply beside the point. Pychologically healthy and mature mothers did not engage in the neurotic, silly "love-tricks" Watson described. Mothers who were emotionally and sexually fulfilled did not misplace their affections on their children. They could love their children as children, not "as a substitute lover," without at all harming them. Conversely, Dell said, neurotic mothers who engaged in "pseudo-maternal" behavior could follow Watson's advice, yet still victimize their children. According to Dell, Watson failed to see the possibility of these differential outcomes.

Dell's (1930) criticisms notwithstanding, he generally praised Watson and Watson's (1928) book, noting that "there are so many fine things in [it] that one regrets the necessity of exposing its follies" (p. 137). More than six decades later, Salzinger (1994) offered a similar assessment. He noted that although the Watsons' book contained some "poor advice and advice beyond data" (p. 154), it also made recommendations that form the foundation of many present child-rearing practices (e.g., the role of daily routines).

Comparisons and Contrasts

Although these criticisms of Watson's advice concerning love and affection are apt by North American standards, the question remains about whether his advice was or was not consistent with the standards of his day. Our review of the child-rearing literature of the 1920s suggests that it was the norm of the day, except on one point, but even here opinion was divided.

Comparisons. As for Watson's advice about establishing routines for sleeping, eating, playing, socializing, and exercising, this was also broadly recommended by most experts at the time (e.g., Jessup, 1923; Kerley, 1923). Watson's advice about punishment was also generally agreed upon – punishment was to be discouraged (i.e., Weill, 1930, cited in Lomax et al., 1978, p. 134). For example, in a widely-read monthly column for *Good Housekeeping*, Kenyon (1926) described strategies for raising well-disciplined children without using corporal punishment. Other experts concurred: Although a "sharp smack on the hands" might serve a useful purpose during the preschool years, "corporal punishment could be entirely eliminated as a disciplinary measure without great loss" (Thom, 1927, p. 127). In general, parents were advised to minimize punishment in order to prevent children from becoming "permanently sulky or hostile," as well as from becoming less likely to tell the truth (Groves & Groves, 1924, p. 95).

With respect to Watson's advice about love and affection, some child-rearing guides of his day supported his recommendations, but not always for the same reasons. *Infant Care* was one such publication (West, 1914). Printed in 1914 by the U.S. Department of Labor Children's Bureau, about 3 million copies had been distributed nationally by 1925. This child-rearing guide emphasized the importance of initiating training, discipline, and routines as early as possible. Parents were also warned against kissing babies on the mouth, but here for medical, not for psychological, reasons, because in the early part of the 20th century, an infant's health was often at risk (Lomax et al., 1978, p. 131). In order to prevent the spread of infections, parents were advised not only to avoid kissing their infants, but also not to hold or pet them beyond what was needed to assure their physical care and nutrition. Similar advice was offered in Holt's (1894/1932) *The Care and Feeding of Children* (as cited in Lomax et al., 1978), which offered a compendium of information on infant and child physical growth, nutrition, and health, and made recommendations concerning their physical care.

The medical advice against kissing and petting infants notwithstanding, these and other sources also advised against some demonstrations of love and affection for reasons closer to Watson's. *Infant Care* (1914), for instance, warned parents not to play with infants, so as to avoid upsetting their regular habits or inducing a "nervous disturbance" (cited in Lomax et al., 1978, p. 130). Holt (1894/1932) likewise recommended that parents not play with infants under six months of age, and play with older infants but minimally, for in addition to making them sleep poorly, suffer from indigestion, and cease gaining weight, it could make them nervous and irritable. Holt's text was widely influential. In 1946, the Grolier Club – a book club – selected it as one of the one hundred books published before 1900 that most "influenced the life and culture of the American people" (Park & Mason, 1957; cited in Lomax et al., 1978, p. 148).

Other authorities commented on both the value and the danger of parental love and affection. For instance, according to Blatz and Bott (1929), affectionate behavior can promote important emotional bonds, but at the same time make children overly dependent on their parents and engender the premature development of sexual impulses. Thom (1927) likewise noted that, although parents should create an "atmosphere of affection, kindly consideration, and fair play" (p. 38), oversolicitous parents may arouse unreasonable fears and anxieties. Indeed, oversolicitousness "often produces the selfish, self-centered, clinging vine type of child" (p. 34).

Contrasts. In contrast to this advice regarding the deleterious effects of love and affection, our review of the child-rearing literature of the 1920s suggests that it was not the norm. At the very least, the advice was more balanced. Goodspeed and Johnson (1929), for instance, advised that it was unwise to:

> ...allow a child to display excessive affection for any one member of the family, nor should he be allowed to look toward any one of the family for an excessive show of affection. A wholesome display of affection based upon a true spirit of kindliness and courtesy will establish the proper 'give and take' in family relations. (p. 206)

In general, though, most of the advice simply noted that affection between parents and children was highly appropriate. Fenton's (1925) *Practical Psychology of Babyhood*, for example, recommended that parents should freely accept the spontaneous affections of their infants. Also, given that babies learn to be affectionate through imitation, she encouraged parents to behave affectionately toward them. Likewise, Groves and Groves (1924) advised parents that "The little baby cannot be loved too much. He needs love and thrives on it as a plant thrives on sunlight" (p. 12). Older children, age six to 10, also need affection: "He craves affection and stability. No amount of material luxury can make up to him for lack of affection. Affection must not be spasmodic. A moderate love that flows gently on, uninterrupted by outbursts of emotion, is surely best for the child." (p. 142).

Discrepancies in the Child Rearing Advice

In summary, Watson's advice about love and affection was consistent with that offered by some "experts" of his day, but was contradicted by most others. The basis of this discrepancy is difficult to determine, however, in order to encourage further research, we speculate briefly about some possible sources.

1. The child-rearing advice differed depending on its reasons. Some "experts" recommended that parents offer love and affection for psychological reasons, both mental and emotional, while others recommended against such

displays – especially, kissing – but only for medical reasons (Lomax et al., 1978).

2. Child-rearing advice that downplayed coddling and affection may have reflected a generational change – a shift from a romantic sentimentality toward children to the new generation's turn toward science and technology (Stendler, 1950).
3. Sociological change was also occurring, in particular, in women's desire for more independence (Frank, 1962; Harris, 1984). In a longitudinal analysis of women's magazines, for instance, Stendler (1950) found an increase, in 1920, in the proportion of the articles on child rearing that advocated a firmer attitude toward infant discipline (e.g., tight scheduling, letting infants "cry it out"). This was, perhaps, a means for bringing more predictability and control into the lives of women.
4. Child rearing advice may also vary with gender of those who provide it. Watson's advice regarding love and affection was written by a "man's man," while the countervailing advice was often written or co-authored by women (e.g., Fenton, 1925; Goodspeed & Johnson, 1929; Groves & Groves, 1924).
5. Although Watson's advice was based, in part, on his research in child development, personal experience may also have played a role. His emotional attachment to his father was devastatingly broken when his father deserted the family without warning (Morris & Todd, 1999). Watson's conditioned negative reactions to this event may have influenced his advice regarding love and affection.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the child-rearing advice of the 1920s cannot be characterized as agreeing on any one set of methods for raising children. The advice often varied across and within those who provided it, and across particular domains of development. In this context, Watson's advice on misbehavior and daily routines was consistent with that of his day, while his advice about love and affection was at variance, albeit not unique. Four conclusions follow from this and the preceding analyses.

First, Watson's child-rearing advice varied from domain to domain and, by today's standards, was informed in some domains, but not in others. Although he had adopted the assumption that, within normal biological limits, children were made, not born, he had no overarching theory about the outcome of development per se. Second, again by today's standards, Watson was not alone in being uninformed about love and affection. Advice such as his was prescribed by behaviorists and nonbehaviorists alike, and thus was not unique to his behaviorism. Third, although Watson's advice is today seen as insensitive to the putative inborn social-emotional needs of infants and children, this was not intentional on his part. He simply did not presume any such needs in the first place. Fourth, much of Watson's advice was prescient of current best practices in child rearing, especially those concerning punishment, positive environmental supports, and prevention through the teaching of alternative repertoires.

In the end, Watson (1936) regretted some of the advice he offered in *Psychological Care of Infant and Child.* It was hasty and insufficiently informed. Had he been able to conduct further basic and applied research, his advice might have been different. Perhaps that is the lesson to be drawn from this episode in the history of developmental psychology. We should never cease analyzing behavior. Wherever behavioral development is historically dependent, not an inevitable outcome, child rearing advice should be continuously and empirically informed.

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