

CONTROL, CONDITIONING, AND COUNSELING

C. H. Patterson

Personnel & Guidance Journal, 1963, 41, 680-686. In Understanding Psychotherapy: Fifty Years of Client-Centered Theory and Practice. PCCS Books, 2000.

Some rather recent developments in psychology raise some issues which have a bearing upon the nature of counseling and psychotherapy. It is the purpose of this paper to consider, if not to resolve, these issues.

Psychology, as the science of behavior, is concerned with the understanding, prediction, and control of such behavior. Counseling and psychotherapy, it is asserted, have as goals the changing of behavior. An individual who is unproductive, unhappy, frustrated, dependent, irresponsible, overly submissive or overly aggressive, et cetera, is expected to become productive, happy, independent, responsible, able to function without undue submissiveness or aggressiveness or other undesirable or self-defeating behavior. In the school situation, we hope that counseling will produce a well behaved student, one who shows the proper degree of dependence and independence, who is attentive, interested, motivated, and achieves up to his ability level, in other words, the ideal student. And often teachers and administrators are not concerned about how the counselor achieves this result, as long as he achieves it.

CONTROL OF BEHAVIOR A FACT

Psychology as the science of behavior should be able to tell us something about methods of changing or modifying human behavior. What does psychology provide in the way of techniques of changing or controlling human behavior?

Although the achievements of psychology are quite modest, and do not measure up to the conceptions of the man in the street, considerable progress has been made in the prediction and control, if not the understanding, of behavior. Although there are differing conceptions of the process and of its operation, the control of behavior through the administering of rewards and punishment has been possible to some extent for a long time (Schlosberg, Skinner, Miller, & Hebb, 1958). The whole field of education has, of course, benefited from the contributions of psychology to the teaching-learning process, with the current teaching machines being only the most recent application of psychology to education.

Perhaps the most recent and spectacular method of changing behavior is by the use of subliminal stimulation (McConnell, Cutler, & McNeil, 1958). Attitudes, opinions, and behavior can apparently be controlled, at least to some extent under some conditions, without the individual being aware of it. While there is some question as to how affective this method is, so that it is

belittled by some psychologists, yet we cannot discount the possibilities of its becoming highly effective.

A method about which there is no question regarding its effectiveness is that known as operant conditioning (Schlosberg, et al, 1958). Operant conditioning is the shaping of behavior through the reinforcement of spontaneous behavior approximating the desired response, and gradually eliciting and rewarding responses which are closer and closer to the desired response. Skinner developed this method, beginning with pigeons, which were taught, among other things, to bowl.

Using this method, an experimenter, or interviewer, can, by his reactions to the verbalizations of the subject, or client, influence verbal behavior. The first study in this area was that of Greenspoon (1950, 1955). He instructed subjects to say all the words they could think of, not using sentences or phrases. Plural nouns were reinforced by the examiner saying "mmm" and "huh-uh". The first expression resulted in an increase in plural responses, while the second led to a decrease, but both expressions resulted in increases when applied to nonplural responses. Numerous studies done since have confirmed the fact that verbal behavior can be influenced by this method of operant conditioning (Cohen, et al, 1954; Hildum & Brown, 1956; Sapolsky, 1960; Salzinger & Pisoni, 1958, 1960; Quay, 1959; Rogers, 1960; Wilson & Verplanck, 1956).

While none of the studies has reported results in actual counseling or psychotherapy, some have approached this. Rogers (1960) found that he could increase negative self-reference statements by saying " mmm-hmmm" and nodding. Although positive self-references were not increased, they remained the same when responded to, while decreasing when not responded to. Schizophrenic patients, as well as normals, have been found to increase the number of statements referring to affect when the interviewer reinforced such statements by agreement (Salzinger & Pisoni, 1958, 1960). Isaacs, Thomas and Goldiamond (1960) report that psychotics can be "taught" to verbalize by operant conditioning after years of muteness. All of these results can be brought about without the awareness of the subject, although awareness may be present.

The technique may be said to be still in the experimental stage. The effectiveness of the procedure in terms of the extent and duration of the changes produced is not known. There is also the possibility that verbal behavior may be changed without any change in other aspects of the individual's behavior. As Hildum and Brown (1956) note: "Perhaps a patient could even be brought to an appearance of mental health through the encouragement of 'healthy' responses." Delusional patients have been known to conceal or deny their delusions in order to achieve the reward of favorable consideration for discharge from the hospital.

That the attitudes and theories of the therapist can affect the responses of the client has been suspected for some time. The way in which this occurs now seems apparent, that is, through the operant conditioning of the responses of the patient by the verbal and non-verbal behavior of the therapist, without either the therapist or client being aware of the process. In this way clients talk about what interests the therapist, and produce support for his theories. As Hildum and Brown (1956) put it, "the therapist who believes in the importance of the Oedipus complex could elicit Oedipal content by means of selective reinforcement". Quay (1959) has experimentally demonstrated this by increasing the discussion of family memories through reinforcement of such material.

The implications of the operant conditioning of verbal behavior thus have significance for counseling and psychotherapy. It might appear that counseling, as a method for controlling and changing behavior, is in for a revolutionary change. It might seem that we have at least the beginnings of objective, practical techniques which can take counseling and psychotherapy out of what many consider to be the realm of fumbling trial and error, flying by the seat of the pants, or intuitive behavior, and bring it into the realm of a scientific procedure involving the application of known objective techniques with known, objective results. "For those interested in such things there appears a glittering new prospect for human manipulation" (Hildum & Brown, 1956).

CONTROL FOR WHAT?

This, it would seem, is a goal to be devoutly desired, and anything which promises this should be seized upon. But before we become too confident that we are approaching the millennium, let us consider the implications of this approach to the modification of human behavior. First, we must recognize that science provides us with techniques, but does not determine the goals toward which we use the technique. What are the results of this approach to changing behavior? What are the indirect as well as the direct results? What are the implications for a philosophy of human life and behavior?

There are many who are concerned, if not alarmed, at the potentialities for evil inherent in the use of these and other techniques, such as the use of drugs, for changing and controlling behavior. Aldous Huxley (1959) is one of these. Another is Paul Tillich (1961), the theologian, who points out that science is corrupting the religion and philosophy of modern man by giving him means without ends. Skinner, an advocate of control, nevertheless recognizes that "There is good reason to fear those who are most apt to seize control" (1953, p. 438). These techniques of control may be, and are, used in propaganda and indoctrination, and are an important element in the process of brain washing (Farber, Harlow, & West, 1957).

But it is not only the specter of Orwell's 1984 (Orwell, 1949), which some discount as a possible or probable result of the application of these techniques, which faces us. Skinner, in his novel *Walden Two* (Skinner, 1948) presents the possibilities of operant conditioning for controlling human behavior in a way which would be acceptable to many. He outlines a utopia based upon the shaping and control of human behavior by operant conditioning without the awareness of the subjects that they are being controlled. He notes that "if it's in our power to create any of the situations which a person likes or to remove any situation he doesn't like, we can control his behavior. When he behaves as we want him to behave, we simply create a situation he likes, or remove one he doesn't like. As a result, the probability that he will behave that way again goes up, which is what we want" (p. 216). He continues: "We can achieve a sort of control under which the controlled, though they are following a code much more scrupulously than was ever the case under the old system, nevertheless feel free. They are doing what they want to do, not what they are forced to do... there's no restraint and no revolt. By a careful cultural design, we control not the final behavior, but the inclination to behave--the motives, the desires, the wishes" (p. 218). To the charge of despotism, Skinner replies: "I don't think anyone should worry about it. The despot must wield his power for the good of others. If he takes any step which reduces the

sum total of human happiness, his power is reduced by a like amount. What better check against malevolent despotism could you ask for? " (p. 220). He presents the possibilities of molding personality. "What do you say to the design of personalities? The control of temperament? Give me the specifications, and I'll give you the man! What do you say to the control of motivation, building interests which will make men most productive and most successful?" (p. 243). This is reminiscent of J. B. Watson.

In the utopia described by Skinner everyone is well-behaved, productive, secure, happy. But is this utopia? Is this a sufficient and desirable goal for man? The goals are chosen by the benevolent despot, not by the people, who are not free, even though they have the sense of freedom. Skinner argues that man is not free in any event. But nevertheless, there is a degree of freedom, and in Skinner's utopia even this is eliminated. Some would feel that if we can make people productive and happy, with a sense of freedom, by methods which do not use force or threat of force, this would be a utopia. Some reason that since positive reinforcement is sought by the individual, there is a freedom or choice present.

WHO SELECTS THE GOALS?

But we cannot get away from the fact that the goals are selected by another, that there is control and manipulation of behavior even if the subjects are not aware of it and are happy. Indeed, these results are achieved because the control and manipulation is so complete. People become automatons. As Tillich (1961) puts it, the manipulation of conditioned reflexes by social and psychological engineering reduces man to the status of an object rather than a subject.

This is not the place to enter into a discussion of free will versus control. There are obviously various kinds and degrees of control, by different sources of control. A word might be said about the word manipulation, however, to which there has been some objection. The writer has used this word elsewhere (Patterson, 1958, 1959) to designate a highly controlled approach to human behavior and human relations. It is recognized, as has been frequently pointed out, that the concept of manipulation or control represents a continuum, that there is no state of absence of manipulation, and that everyone, including the client-centered counselor, as we shall see, manipulates. But again, it is equally obvious that there are extremes to any continuum, and the difference between the extremes--a matter of five or six standard deviations--is significant, both statistically and practically. The word is used for want of a better. The matter of degree of manipulation, or control, of the behavior of one person by another is something that must be faced. Is a state of complete control even for the goal of happiness, security, and contentment, desirable? And is the conditioning method the only method for changing behavior? We shall consider the last question first, and then return the first.

Fortunately for mankind, in the opinion of some, there is another way of changing human behavior, a way which is also supported by scientific research. It is a method of changing behavior without depriving the individual of freedom. In fact, its purpose and result is to free the individual as much as possible from the control of external circumstances and to enable him to achieve control of himself and his environment. The goal of this approach--a goal which is outside of, and not determined by science--is self-direction and self-actualization. For simplicity, we shall refer to this as the understanding approach to human behavior. There is no implication

that it is one extreme of the manipulation or control continuum; it may be a qualitatively different approach, although it does represent a minimum of control.

We now know the conditions under which constructive personality change can occur without the introduction of control and manipulation of the responses of the individual. These are the conditions of client-centered counseling. We shall not here consider these conditions. But we should dispose of a question which arises from an apparent contradiction in client-centered counseling. On the one hand, we emphasize the independence, responsibility, self-determination, and freedom of choice of the individual. On the other hand we refer to the conditions of counseling and the techniques of the counselor, which are imposed on the client, with little that he can do about it. Isn't the client-centered counselor being manipulative here?

In a broad sense of the term, the answer is yes. The counselor is attempting to influence the behavior of the client--this is obvious; otherwise he wouldn't be engaged in counseling. We must recognize that anything we do, in or out of counseling, has some influence on others, that it is not possible, in this sense to avoid some control or manipulation of the behavior of others. It is important, however, to recognize this and to determine what kind of an influence we wish to have upon others. The client-centered counselor is aware of this influence and is clear upon the kind of influence he desires to have upon the client. The objective of this manipulation distinguishes it from other kinds of manipulation. The nature of the behavior changes desired, and which the conditions are designed to bring about, are not the changes occurring under the conditions of direct conditioning of behavior as outlined under the manipulative approach discussed above. The goal of counseling, and the result of the conditions established, is the freeing of the client for self-direction or self-actualization. As Rogers recently phrased it, "We have established by external control conditions which we predict will be followed by internal control by the individual, in pursuit of internally chosen goals...by less dependence upon others, an increase of expressiveness as a person, an increase in variability, flexibility, and effectiveness of adaptation, an increase in self-responsibility and self-direction" (Rogers, 1961). The difference, then, is one of directly conditioning behavior which is desired by the manipulator on the one hand, and on the other providing the conditions under which the individual is enabled to make his own choices and decisions regarding his specific behavior. We freely admit that the latter is a choice of the counselor as the goal of counseling, and thus represents his values and philosophy.

We cannot deny that the counselor's behavior, and his responses to the client, do influence the client's verbalizations, and in this sense the counselor utilizes operant conditioning. The techniques which the counselor uses may be considered as the operant conditioning of the client's behavior in the interview. It is necessary that the client talk, if he is to make progress in counseling. Listening by the counselor, and the showing of interest and concern in what the client is saying, encourage the client to talk and to continue talking. In addition, the client must talk about certain things in certain ways if he is to progress in understanding of himself. The counselor encourages the client to talk about himself and his relations with others, about his feelings and attitudes toward himself and others, by responding to self-statements and feelings, and by not responding to comments or statements about the weather, current events, or other impersonal material. The research on operant conditioning helps us to understand what we do in counseling. But the important point is that the counselor uses such a technique not to control or

manipulate the client's behavior toward specific counselor chosen goals, but to encourage client behavior which will lead to the development of a situation in which the client gains in self-understanding, self-reliance, and the ability to take responsibility for himself and his behavior. In other words, the counselor's techniques may be viewed as operant conditioning which creates the conditions for achieving the goal of counseling which is self-determination and self-actualization.

UNDERNEATH TECHNIQUES

But the application of the technique merely to get the client to talk about himself is apparently not sufficient for continued progress on the part of the client. More than this appears to be necessary. There seems to be reason to believe that only when there is genuine interest in and understanding of the client when he responds to these techniques that he can make progress. The counselor must be genuine and offer a relationship into which the client can enter, rather than being a detached, objective, uninvolved outsider applying a carefully planned conditioning technique. That is, it seems that the optimum condition for personality development on the part of the client--the most powerful reinforcer, in conditioning terms--is the genuine, spontaneous concern, interest and understanding of the counselor. This, rather than dispensing simple rewards, either of candy or cigarettes by a machine or verbal rewards or behavior such as smiling or nodding, is apparently necessary for real growth in the client. The study of Sapolsky (1960) lends some support to the importance of other factors than the routine administration of reinforcement. In two experiments he showed that the effectiveness of reinforcement depended upon the relationship between the experimenter and the subject. Subjects who were given instructions which pictured the experimenter as attractive conditioned well, while those who were led to perceive the experimenter as unattractive did not condition during the experimental period, although there was evidence of delayed conditioning. Similarly, subjects who were matched with experimenters for similarity (compatibility) on the basis of a personality test conditioned better than those who were incompatible.

SUMMARY

Recent developments in psychology relating to the control of human behavior raise some problems and issues of significance to counseling and psychotherapy. They require us to examine the goals and techniques of counseling, as well as the goals of society. The issues have been stated, and a resolution, recognized as only tentative, has been attempted.

We may summarize by suggesting that there are two basically different approaches to counseling, or indeed to any human relationship. The first of these, designated as manipulation, is characterized by the shaping or molding of the behavior of others in directions determined by the counselor. The direction, or the resulting behavior, may be for the presumed good of the person being directed--his adjustment, integration, happiness, freedom from symptoms, etc. But this is as defined by the counselor. The essence of the approach is that the counselor is an outside, external force determining rather specific behavior outcomes by his activities. As the control of the counselor increases, as his goals become more specific in terms of behavior outcomes, the freedom of the client becomes restricted.

The second approach has been termed understanding. Here the counselor has as his goal not specific behavior outcomes or actions; the goal is for the client to become a responsible, independent, self-actualizing person capable of determining his own behavior.

Perhaps the terms manipulation and understanding are not the best ones to use here. It has been pointed out that the counselor using the understanding approach manipulates. He manipulates or controls the counseling environment. But the control is for the purpose of creating a situation which will result in a freeing of the client from the more detailed, restrictive controls not only of the counselor but of others in his environment, so that he may become, insofar as possible, a responsible, self-controlled individual rather than an automaton or puppet, even a happy one, dancing to the tune of the counselor or of others in his environment. It is the goal of the counseling process, perhaps more than a complete difference in techniques, which distinguishes the two approaches.

Nevertheless, the understanding approach is more than the application of techniques. The essential nature of this approach is the establishing of a human relationship in which the emphasis is upon the expression of certain attitudes, rather than the rigid, wooden, standardized application of techniques. The condition for personality change of the kind desired in the understanding approach is an atmosphere of acceptance, interest, and understanding, a genuine relationship rather than a controlled application of a technique in a cold, objective detached manner.

REFERENCES

Cohen, B. D., Kalish, H. I., Thurston, J. R. & Cohen, E. (1954). Experimental manipulation of verbal behavior. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 47, 106-110.

Farber, I. E., Harlow, H. F., & West, L. J. (1957). Brainwashing, conditioning, and DDD (debility, dependency, and dread). *Sociometry*, 20, 271-285.

Greenspoon, J. S. The effect of a verbal stimulus as a reinforcement. (1950). *Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science*, 59, 287.

Greenspoon, J. (1955). The reinforcing effect of two spoken sounds on the frequency of two responses. *American Journal of Psychology*, 68, 409-416.

Hildum, D. C., & Brown, R. W.(1956). Verbal reinforcement and interviewer bias. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 53, 108-111.

Huxley, A. In Featherstone, R. M., & Simon, A. (Eds.) (1959). *A pharmacologic approach to the study of the mind*. Springfield, Illinois: Thomas, 1959.

Isaacs, W., Thomas, J., & Goldiamond, I. (1960). Application of operant conditioning to reinstate verbal behavior in psychotics. *Journal of Speech & Hearing Disorders*. 25, 8-12.

Krasner, L. Studies of the conditioning of verbal behavior. (1958). *Psychological Bulletin*, 55, 148-170.

Lindsley, O. R. (1956). Operant conditioning methods applied to chronic schizophrenic patients. (1956). *Psychiatric Research Reports. No. 5. Research techniques in schizophrenia..* Washington, D. C., American Psychiatric Association. Pp. 118-153.

Lindsley, O. R. & Skinner, B. F. (1954). A method for experimental analysis of the behavior of psychotic patients. *American Psychologist*, 9, 419-420 (Abstract).

McConnell, J. V., Cutler, R. L., & McNeil, E. B. (1958). Subliminal stimulation: an overview. *American Psychologist*, 13, 229-242.

Orwell, G. (1949). 1984. New York: Harcourt, Brace.

Patterson, C. H. Two approaches to human relations. (1958). *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 12, 691-708.

Patterson, C. H. (1959). *Counseling and psychotherapy: Theory and practice*. New York: Harper.

Quay, H. (1959). The effect of verbal reinforcement on the recall of early memories. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 59, 254-257.

Rogers, C. R. (1961). The place of the person in the world of the behavioral sciences. *Personnel & Guidance Journal*, 39, 444-451.

Rogers, M. J. (1960). Operant conditioning in a quasi-therapy setting. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 60, 247-252.

Salzinger, K., & Pisoni, Stephanie. (1958). Reinforcement of affect responses of schizophrenics during the clinical interview. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 57, 84-90.

Salzinger, K., & Pisoni, S. (1960). Reinforcement of verbal affect responses of normal subjects during the interview. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 60, 127-130.

Sapolsky, A. (1960). Effect of interpersonal relationships upon verbal conditioning. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 60, 241-246.

Schlosberg, H., Skinner, B. F., Miller, N. E., & Hebb, D. O. (1958). Control of behavior through motivation and reward. *American Psychologist*, 13, 93-113.

Skinner, B. F. (1948). *Walden two*. New York: Macmillan.

Skinner, B. F. (1953). *Science and human behavior*. New York: Macmillan.

Tillich, P. Report of a speech given at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in *Time*, April 21, 1961, p. 57.

Verplanck, W. S. (1955). The control of the content of conversation: reinforcement of statements of opinion. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 51, 688-676.

Wilson, W. C., & Verplanck, W. S. (1956). Some observations on the reinforcement of verbal operants. *American Journal of Psychology*, 69, 448-451.