

EDITORIAL: THE SCIENCE OF BEHAVIOR AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The “good life” is not a world in which people have what they need; it is one in which the good things they need figure as reinforcers in effective contingencies (Skinner, 1975/1996, p. 69).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 1948, enumerates “rights and freedoms” to which every person is entitled “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” There are, in fact, two principle types of rights included in the Universal Declaration: freedom from threat and punishment of particular kinds, and opportunities to access reinforcers. Examples of the first include the right to liberty and security of person, the right not to be subjected to “torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,” to “arbitrary arrest, detention or exile,” or to “arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation.” Examples of the second, include the right “to marry and to found a family,” to “seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers,” and to “work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.” There is much more (see the Behaviorists for Social Responsibility website for the full declaration), but this gives a flavor for the Declaration.

Human rights are much in the news as the world becomes increasingly interconnected. This is a world of interlocking cultural practices, in which some practices may produce rich reinforcers for the few, but only minimal reinforcers for many others, often despite high levels of behavior. This is also a world in which establishing operations are often manipulated through marketing to increase motivation to work for reinforcers that may, in the long run, produce poor individual and collective outcomes.

What, if anything, can the science of behavior contribute to the realization of the rights enumerated in the Declaration in this cultural context? Perhaps one small contribution is a way of understanding “rights.” Contemporary understandings of human rights suggest that rights are not possessions; rather they are better viewed as relationships entailing obligations (Lowery, in press). Skinner defined “culture” as the “contingencies of reinforcement maintained by a group” (1987, p. 74)—contingencies that maintain cultural practices (Biglan, 1995). Perhaps, then, positive rights might be thought of as contingencies in which those things that persons and peoples need to survive and thrive figure as reinforcers, while negative rights might be viewed as involving freedom from contingencies of coercion (Sidman, 2001). The science of behavior suggests that cultures emphasizing contingencies in which valued events, conditions and things figure as “effective reinforcers” are likely to produce high levels of behavior, low levels of countercontrol, and few side effects. In contrast, contingencies based in extensive

threat and punishment are ever at risk of collapse, require extensive surveillance, and are likely to produce minimal behavior with high risk of countercontrol. There are a number of ways in which such understanding might be of some utility in supporting human rights.

First, the science of behavior might inform the actions of policy makers at many levels, from the organization to the national. For example, we have many examples of behavioral work with schools in which increasing reliance on constructional contingencies that rely on reinforcement, and reducing reliance on aversive produce dramatic improvements in achievement and behavior. Presenting these findings as hard science, rather than as soft-heartedly permissive, in some cases clearly increases interest in adopting the proposed practices. The science of behavior also supports constructional approaches to reducing poverty (as opposed to forms of welfare reform that rely almost entirely on aversive control and deprivation). A strong argument can even be made from the science to support free speech, since suppression is likely to lead to countercontrol, and perhaps even to increased acts of resistance and terrorism. There are many other ways in which behavior analysts can contribute to public policy (Fawcett et al., 1988), and much of public policy has human rights dimensions.

In terms of the general public, the more transparently networks of interlocking contingencies that shape behavior are clarified, the more likely effective systems of countercontrolling practices can be developed when they are needed. Perhaps consequence analysis, an approach developed by Stephen Fawcett and colleagues to assist participants to attend to and weigh multiple consequence of policy decisions (see Moore & Mattaini, this volume), could therefore be used to support wider application of the science of behavior to public opinion regarding issues with human rights implications. And there are many other possibilities as well (including clinical applications) for using the science of behavior to support social justice. Much of applied behavior analysis has substantial human rights implications (and therefore carries heavy responsibilities).

For example, one area that will be explored in the next issue is the extent to which the science of behavior might help in understanding the mechanisms of nonviolence as an instrument for social change, as practiced by the early Quakers, by Gandhi and others in India, by Badshah Khan and others in Pakistan and Afghanistan, by King and others in the US. Perhaps such analyses could ultimately contribute to even more effective strategies for such efforts. The hope of Behaviorists for Social Responsibility is that *Behavior and Social Issues* can continue to serve as a nexus for a broad range of conceptual and applied analyses that can buttress human rights at all levels, from the individual to the sociocultural. Toward that end, many forms of science-based analysis, conceptual, experimental, and descriptive that assist in understanding and contributing to social justice, human rights, and the survival of human and other species are needed; readers are encouraged to submit such work for possible publication.

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