

REFLECTIONS ON BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS AND COERCION

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ABSTRACT: Coercion is defined as the control of behavior through: (a) punishment or the threat of punishment, or (b) negative reinforcement—the removal of punishment. The question under discussion is whether coercion is an effective and a desirable basis for applied behavior analysis. Because coercive control has always been characteristic of society in general, the problem requires consideration of all facets of our culture. Behavior analysts who use or recommend coercive techniques of therapy, behavior modification, teaching, parenting, and so on, must be viewed in that context. In many areas of society, the practice of coercion has been refined and perfected to an extent that applied behavior analysis has never approached. Applied behavioral research therefore contributes nothing new when it applies coercive methodology. Also, coercion produces side effects that may be even less desirable than the original problem behavior. The occasional need to use coercion to deal with emergencies does not justify the advocacy of coercion as a principle of therapy. What basic and applied behavior analysts can offer that is new and constructive are positive reinforcement techniques for teaching new behavior and stimulus-control techniques for establishing cognitive repertoires.

For many years I have been doing laboratory research, at first with nonhuman subjects on the topics of avoidance behavior and the effects of punishment; then, with both nonhuman and human subjects on the learning process. Along with these basic researches, I have also pursued applied behavior analysis with the retarded and autistic. What I have to say here is based on my own, my colleagues', and others' studies in these areas. But now, I am not going to discuss research directly. In the area of coercion, which is my topic here, the basic research was done a long time ago; it is time to talk about the significance of those experiments.

When I speak of coercion, I refer first, to our use of punishment or the threat of punishment—the practice of getting others to act as we would like by punishing or threatening to punish them; and second, to our use of negative reinforcement—getting others to act in a particular way by allowing them to terminate, escape, or avoid our punishments and threats. Defined in this manner, is coercion an acceptable basis for applied behavior analysis?

The context of this question is much broader than the practice of behavior analysis. It is a question that all of us, not only as professionals but as human beings, must ask ourselves. Coercive control has always been characteristic of society in general. The problem requires consideration of all facets of our culture. Coercive techniques of therapy, behavior modification, teaching, parenting, and so on, must be viewed in that context. My own laboratory experiences taught me to worry about the coercion that we characteristically use to control each other.

We have, however, been greatly preoccupied with responses to professional

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groups that would have us continue to practice our culture's ordinary coercion. The advocates of coercive therapy and teaching have created a considerable stir, actively resisting attempts to regulate coercive practices. In the process, they have produced a strong impression among the general public that behavior analysis is the science of coercion.

Many, of course, do question the much-used coercive methods of behavioral control—punishment and escape from or avoidance of punishment. Nobody likes to be punished, and many do not like to punish others. But we can do better than just express our prejudices. Attention to principles and data from the science of behavior analysis can provide some objectivity in deciding whether punishment is desirable or effective.

Although behavior analysts have considerably more to offer, they are called on most frequently to deal with behavior problems: destruction of self and environment, violations of social norms, and other conduct that distresses the family and the community. For the most part, they do that task well, even when others have thrown up their hands in despair. But this is the context in which questions about punishment usually arise. What do you do, for example, when a child who has been labelled *autistic* persists in scratching at her eyes? Is punishment an effective way to keep autistic and retarded children from maiming themselves and destroying their surroundings?

Such problems often do require emergency measures, but I do not believe we can give any lasting answers without taking into account what we know about the use of coercion in general. It will be relevant, then, to say a few words about our coercive environment.

This Coercive World

We live in a coercive world, bombarded by warning signals and threats. Law enforcement agencies pay attention to us only when we have done something punishable. Educators bemoan the permissive society that forbids them the use of the stick, and they warn us, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." We give options like "Eat your vegetables—or else no dessert," or "Say that again—and I'll wash your mouth with soap." These are supposed to teach children "what is good for them." Legal, business, and social institutions communicate with us most frequently by advising us what we should do—or else. The common meaning of "behave yourself" is "Do what *I* want." Coercing us, threatening us with punishment or loss, is the predominant technique for making us "behave."

The hostile environment

Nature itself sets the example, constantly threatening to overwhelm us with cold, heat, wind, rain, snow, flood, earthquake, or fire. Nature even exacts a price for its gifts, threatening to take away with one hand what it has given with the other; famine always follows feast. Everyday contingencies and less-likely catastrophes (and rules derived from these) teach us that the forces of nature will come down hard on us if we do not avoid.

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As we grow older, threats from the internal environment intensify. We defend ourselves against our own body's coercion by supporting incredibly expensive medical research and treatment facilities; at the same time, we submit to the cold mercies of the insurance industry. The tax code gives depreciation allowances for machinery, but not for human bodies.

The hostile community

Perhaps the ever present physical coercion is responsible for the general acceptance of social coercion, too, as a fact of life. I once heard punishment recommended as a way to teach the developmentally disabled; nonpunitive methods were said to contradict the principle of normalization. The speaker argued that a classroom without punishment is an abnormal environment, to which children should not be exposed.

Social coercion is accepted as natural. Inhabitants of most large cities take it for granted that they must bolt their doors, secure their purses, carry an extra wallet with a few small bills to hand over when faced with a knife or gun, and lock their car doors even when driving. No women and only foolish men walk after dark in that famous cradle of liberty, the Boston Common; mugging, rape, and robbery are inevitable there and the police react only with contempt for the victim's ignorant carelessness. On a larger scale, terrorism has become a standard expression of economic, religious, or political dissatisfaction.

But not only the lawless practice coercion. Society punishes criminals and children in the hope of forestalling repetitions of unacceptable conduct. Our laws define desirable conduct mainly so that we can recognize and punish deviations. Rarely do we invoke Justice as a reason for giving something good to a person who has behaved well. Someone who gets "just desserts" does not receive something sweet as a fair return for good behavior. When we hear, "Justice will prevail," we know that somebody is going to get punished. We specify punishment for undesirable conduct but virtue is supposed to provide its own reward.

Our police, on whom we rely for everyday protection and security, are taught to intimidate, compel, and punish. Particularly in our large cities, the police have come to represent a power to be feared, even by the law-abiding.

Family coercion starts early. As soon as infants begin to "get into" things, adults resort to restraint and punishment to set limits. Some parents rarely speak to their children except to scold, correct, or criticize. The coercive model quickly teaches even infants the standard way to get others to do what they want.

Like environmental coercion, social coercion is so prevalent that we find it hard to imagine life without it. B. F. Skinner advanced the thesis that the concept of freedom would be unnecessary if our society could eliminate the conditions *from* which we were always seeking freedom. If we had never enslaved one another, the ideal of freedom from bondage would not have been needed. If we did not try to control each other by threats of punishment, deprivation, restriction, and loss, we would all be free—without the concept of freedom ever having arisen. Freedom would then be a fact of life but the term would not even have entered our language.

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The notion that we might possibly exist without coercing one another was so incomprehensible that many otherwise thoughtful readers denounced Skinner because they believed he must be attacking the ideal of freedom itself. In reality, he was arguing for the elimination of those “facts of life” from which we all yearn to be freed—in particular, from the coercion that we use to control each other.

Most people do try at one time or another to influence through praise, flattery, encouragement, or reward. But these are often accompanied by the implication that failure to meet expectations will cause even rewards that have already been earned to be taken away. When people do use noncoercive techniques, they almost always do so in combination with coercion. We are astonished if offered a carrot that is not backed up by a stick.

To recognize that coercion is everywhere about us is to place coercive intervention in a context that helps explain its persistence. When we look beyond our immediate practical concerns, we see that those who advocate and use coercion for therapeutic and educational purposes are acting well within social norms and customs. They are moving with the crowd.

To set coercive therapists in the context of a coercive society, however, is also to point out that they are doing nothing that requires special training or competence. Saying and doing what has always been said and done, they contribute nothing new. In this instance, failing to contribute is not neutral; it is wrong. It is wrong because their science has made it possible to do more.

The Analysis of Coercion

A significant body of rigorous laboratory data supports the contention that coercion is both undesirable and unnecessary. Even many students of behavior seem to know little about those data and their implications for the conduct of everyday affairs.

What do we know about coercion? How do we know it?

The variables that govern our day-to-day pursuits do interact in ways that are complex, ever changing, and often not directly analyzable. In extrapolating from the carefully controlled laboratory, one has to take many liberties. I believe the extrapolations are justified; the laboratory has taught us much more about human affairs than many have been willing to acknowledge.

To claim understanding that we do not have is, of course, unjustified and can be dangerous. Yet, failing to share what we do know can be even more dangerous. Our continuing dependence on coercion in international relations, for example, is likely eventually to lead us to self-extermination. Remaining overcautious, failing to inform students and the public, is more dangerous than extrapolating too broadly.

Also, what we see in experiments guides our observation outside the laboratory, helping us find consistency in the seeming disorderliness of everyday life. This is not oversimplification; it is a special way of looking at the world that can help us understand it and often do something about its problems. The experimental behavior analyst who has seen how powerfully consequences influence conduct can

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often cut through many irrelevancies and determine exactly why a child throws temper tantrums, why a youngster drops out of school, or why terrorists continue to kidnap and kill. Experimental analysts have seen that small alterations of the environment can stop one action and immediately start new behavior going; they will often be able to stop self-destruction by changing the environment rather than by manipulating consequences. It is important for behavior analysts, like laboratory scientists of all kinds, to share their special ways of observing and interpreting everyday events.

With the advantage of controlled laboratory conditions, we have been able to see that coercion and conduct are related in ways not immediately apparent outside the laboratory. It is impossible to escape the conclusion that if the effects of coercion were generally understood, it would no longer be the method of choice for influencing others, whether we call that influence Education, Discipline, Law Enforcement, Government, Diplomacy, Human Relations, or Therapy. We see all about us overwhelming evidence that the consequences of coercion are not understood at all.

What are the consequences of coercion?

Even when coercion accomplishes its immediate aim, it is in the long run self-defeating. Like drugs, coercion produces *side effects*. These sometimes have considerably greater behavioral significance than the hoped-for main effects. Also like many drugs, punishment and other forms of coercion have been introduced into our culture without adequate testing. Perhaps a more thorough evaluation of coercive practices will cause them, too, to be taken off the approved list.

We know first of all that punishment can stop behavior. We also know that punishment *only* stops behavior. It does not substitute new behavior for the old; it does not teach. Sending a juvenile delinquent to reform school is going to stop his bank robberies and muggings. But given the coercive modeling present in the daily life of the incarcerated, along with the absence of programs for teaching appropriate alternative behavior, stronger forms of inappropriate behavior are likely to be learned. Reform school does not teach the lawbreaker any other way to satisfy his or her needs. The punishment certainly does not lessen the intensity of those needs; we know that upon discharge the youth is going to go back to the old environment and to the old ways. What else is available?

Unless punishment is extremely strong, it stops undesirable behavior only temporarily. And if it is strong, it causes other problems. We can, for example, get children to learn by punishing them for not learning. Children whom we teach that way, however, are likely to develop an aversion to learning, an aversion to the people who are supposed to teach them, and an aversion to the places where teaching is supposed to go on. It is no accident that school buildings are frequent targets of vandalism.

Later, as adults, those who had been coerced into learning are often heard to speak admiringly about teachers who "tolerated no nonsense;" at the same time, however, they avoid opportunities for continued education or training. Furthermore, if they have been exposed only to coercive teaching, then, when they become

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teachers or parents themselves, they are likely to follow that same model. Coercive practices continue from generation to generation, becoming ingrained in pedagogical training and accepted in the home and the community.

Handicapped children who are ignored because people consider them unable to appreciate or adapt to their environments sometimes discover that if they damage themselves—hitting, scratching, clawing, lacerating themselves and drawing blood—they become the center of attention. And if we shock the self-destruction out of them, what else do they have available?

And so, even though their caretakers do not realize what they are doing, they teach many of these children to administer pain to themselves as the only way to make the world react. Ordinarily, if we provide the same attention in return for constructive acts, the self-abuse will cease. But when self-administered pain brings attention and other reinforcers, the pain itself becomes reinforcing, often competing successfully with more benign consequences.

The only kinds of learning that punishment can generate are escape and avoidance. These often take forms that the punisher does not intend. The ancient Code of Hammurabi prescribed that a physician whose treatment failed would suffer the same fate as his patient. If the patient lost an eye, an arm, or a leg, so would the physician. These harsh rules may have succeeded to some extent in helping to ensure the competence of medical practitioners but we can be certain that the retribution inflicted on physicians also had other effects. Many extremely ill patients undoubtedly suffered neglect because no physician was willing to risk his neck—or any other body part—by attempting a cure. The severe punishments might have made practitioners more careful, but certainly, much of what they learned as a consequence of Hammurabi's code was oriented not toward their patients' survival but their own.

At home, physical and verbal abuse *can* keep children and spouses subservient to your own needs and desires. You *can* rule your family by "laying down the law," punishing all infractions. Children and spouses *can* be intimidated by physical violence or isolation, by deprivation of possessions and privileges, by cutting off communication, or by subtle intellectual and sexual "put-downs."

But these seemingly effective forms of coercion turn the family into something its members seek to escape. Before actual escape is possible, many children who are reared under tyranny learn the ways of tyranny, ending up as problem children who have found out how to appropriate more than their share of the family's attention, time, and resources. Later, as parents, not knowing any other way, they become family tyrants themselves.

Coercion transforms marriage into slavery, and acts of love into mere rituals, formalities to be observed for the sake of keeping peace or avoiding terror. Among the consequences are to be found many of the usual forms of escape: divorce, dropout, mental illness, and suicide.

Another consequence of coercion is the transformation of ordinarily benign people, places, and things into coercers. Environmental elements that signal punishment become punishers themselves, and generate all the side effects of punishment.

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Students who receive failing grades, disapproval and humiliation from their teachers, and contempt from their peers, are likely to shun the environment where learning is supposed to take place. They become dropouts.

Managers who tell workers to “produce—or else” experience a higher personnel turnover than do those who simply arrange promotions, higher pay, and time off as the outcomes of productivity.

Patients are likely to leave the care of a physician who warns them that they should *not eat* so much because they are *too fat*. Instead, they will find a physician who advises them what they *should eat* in order to become *thin*.

People are always escaping from schools for the retarded; we react with pity, attributing such seemingly nonadaptive actions to the escapee’s lack of intelligence. In many such “schools,” however, the residents learn only to adapt to avoidance contingencies that the keepers set up for their own convenience. Escape from that environment does not always indicate low intelligence; it is just as likely to represent a perfectly rational adjustment to coercive control. We should regard escapes by the retarded as cries not for pity but for help.

People who use punishment become objects of aversion themselves, feared, hated, and avoided; their very presence becomes a punishment. Acquaintances, relatives, coworkers, anyone who is not compelled to remain in contact with them will find ways to interrupt or discontinue the relationship. Coercive teachers will find their students no longer available to receive their instruction; coercive parents will find their children leaving home as soon as they can; coercive policemen will find their beat a lonely one. Anyone who uses shock becomes a shock.

Those who recommend and use punishment and negative reinforcement as therapeutic techniques are now having to face the consequences of their own behavior. Public concern is bringing about attempts to restrict by law the use of coercion in therapy, and even to forbid the practice of behavior analysis itself. These unfortunate byproducts of coercive therapy should have been predictable. Anyone familiar with the experimental literature and any experienced observer of conduct outside the laboratory knows that coercion, if it cannot be escaped or avoided, eventually generates *countercoercion*. The good intentions of therapists, including behavior analysts, do not exempt them from countercontrol. The ultimate losers, of course, are the clients for whom noncoercive behavior analysis would be the effective—often, the only effective—treatment.

Nor do the good intentions of therapists exempt them from other laws of behavior. If punishment seems to work even once, stopping one client’s harmful or offensive behavior even temporarily, the use of punishment will be reinforced. That is to say, the therapist will do it again. And again, and again, and again.

The public is right to be alarmed. One successful use of a cattle prod will produce more of the same, and nobody, not even the therapist, can tell whether he/she is using shock because nothing else will work or because of his/her own reinforcement history. Aversive therapy produces therapists who, themselves, become aversive.

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Behavioral Control

It is not possible here to list all the ways coercion affects everyday life. Enough is known about the consequences of coercion to guide professional practice, personal conduct, and public policy. The basic information and its significance have gone unrecognized. We can attribute much of this neglect to general misunderstanding of the concept of behavioral control. Because coercive control is so prevalent, many take *control* and *coercion* to be synonyms. That is why the concept of behavioral control frightens people.

And because a science of behavior must assume that behavior is controlled, many regard behavior analysis as the science of coercion. To take the position that punishment is a standard therapeutic technique, and therefore should not be regulated, is to validate the public's perception that punishment is what behavior analysis is all about.

People not acquainted with the science regard the existence of behavioral control as a matter of opinion, something that one can agree or disagree with, advocate or oppose. Behavior analysts see control as a fact of nature but the public sees behavior analysts as advocates of control and therefore of coercion. Following up this reasoning, they ask, "And why would anyone advocate the control of conduct unless they wanted to do the controlling themselves?" And so they equate behavior analysts with the controllers in *Brave New World*, *Clockwork Orange*, and *1984*.

Brave New World, of course, did not invent behavioral control, nor did *Clockwork Orange*, *1984*, or behavior analysis. Control would exist even if there were no novelists or behavior analysts to tell us about it. The control of conduct by the physical and social environment is a built-in feature of the world; we come that way. The notion might displease and even frighten us but the laws of behavior are a feature of the world we live in; we cannot repeal them.

Why do so many seem eager to do just that—repeal the laws of behavior? Here is where coercion comes back into the picture. Regarding control as synonymous with coercion, the public is afraid. Given the coercive nature of the control most of us have become accustomed to, this fear must be respected. But if control and coercion were the same, we would have to classify as coercion all teaching, salesmanship, seduction, arranging of appointments, or excitement of audiences to tears or laughter. Each of these is an attempt to control what someone else does.

Consequences do control our conduct but those consequences, although they are often coercive, need not be. It is possible to learn, to enjoy, and to love without coercion, but all of the actions that we include in those categories are controlled by people and places. If we face up to the inevitability of control, we will find that where existing control is coercive, we can often substitute noncoercive methods. This, of course, is where the real science of behavior analysis comes in.

Coercion and Behavior Analysis

When we look at the broad picture, whether or not to punish disappears as a genuine problem. The clear answer is "No."

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Exceptional cases, of course, do arise. Sometimes we punish because we are fallible human beings and make mistakes. Sometimes we are driven to apply punishment to save someone from immediate self-destruction. And even when noncoercive methods may have almost completely eliminated a strong teenager's aggression, an occasional resurgence of life-threatening attack will require that he be immobilized until the episode passes.

These kinds of marginal cases pose no problems. As long as they remain marginal, common sense tells us that we have to use whatever effective means are at hand. Mistakes, a temporary lack of relevant information, or an occasional emergency may justify punishment as a treatment of last resort. But to use punishment occasionally as an act of desperation is not the same as advocating the use of punishment as a principle of behavior management. It is a step backward to take such special situations, however severe they may be, as bases for a systematic approach to the solution of behavior problems. It is a terrible mistake to allow the exceptional cases to define the field.

Many are willing to accept restrictions on the use of coercive therapy, agreeing, for example, to use coercion only when no positive procedure solves the problem. In principle, I cannot dispute that well-meant and sensible condition. In fact, I believe that the prerequisite—nothing else works—is rarely met. I would go so far as to say to anyone who claims to have tried everything else, "Tell me what you did. I will then suggest a procedure you did not try." Undoubtedly, I would sometimes be unable to do this—but not very often.

I am also skeptical about therapists' claims that they use the temporary post-punishment suppression of unwanted behavior as an opportunity to teach desirable behavior. In a videotape that was made specifically to support the use of shock in cases of self-destruction, I saw the "treated" child participating afterwards in a teaching interaction that can only be described as incompetent. A demonstration of effective teaching, with less concentration on the technical sophistication of the shock-delivery system, would have given me more confidence that constructive follow-up procedures were actually being used.

Too often, after aversive therapy has "cured" autistic children of their self-destructive and other dangerous and inconvenient behavior, they continue their existence as zombies. And even more often, when those who have been so skillfully "cured" find that their cure has simply made all their old reinforcers disappear, they relapse into their former ways. But by then, they have usually gone to some other agency and are someone else's responsibility.

In general, I would feel more comfortable if behavior analysts and others who justify aversive therapy by pleading, "Nothing else works," would show that they regard seemingly intractable cases as failures, each one to be regretted and accepted as a challenge. Yes, I could be more tolerant of their claim that they have not given up too easily, that they are using coercive interventions because everything else had failed. I would have to see them not just stopping behavior but constructing behavior. When behavior analysts automatically resort to coercion, I cannot help wondering whether they are simply conforming to standard societal practices instead of making the unique contributions their profession trained them for. Knee-jerk coercion is not behavior analysis.

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It is worth repeating that no emergency gives punishment the status of a therapeutic principle. The history of what is often called civilization teaches us all we need to know about how to use punishment. In law enforcement, government, the military, business, religion, Academe, the family, and many other areas, the practice of coercion has been refined and perfected to an extent that applied behavior analysis has never approached.

Historically, it was basic research in behavior analysis that revealed the extraordinary destructive power of coercion in the control of behavior. A more important contribution has been a remarkably successful basic and applied research methodology that has led to the development and application of positive reinforcement techniques for teaching new behavior, of stimulus-control techniques for establishing cognitive repertoires, and of techniques for constructing contexts that create and maintain positive rather than coercive social interactions. The kinds of self-destruction, social aggression, and environmental trashing that are so often seen in the developmentally disabled can be prevented from arising in the first place by setting up social contexts in which positive reinforcement contingencies and effective teaching techniques prevail. Ineffective teaching produces and exacerbates problem behavior. The key to prevention is the construction of an environment that continuously creates new reinforcers and generates new behavior for which the new reinforcers are appropriate.

Although often devised for the study of fundamental behavioral processes, the research methods are available for application outside the laboratory. That computers help conduct the research, often with nonhuman subjects, should present no difficulties. Any well-trained teacher or therapist should be able to adapt even complex stimulus-control procedures from automated to "tabletop" use. Clinicians should be able to adapt useful methods even from studies done with nonhuman subjects. Certification to practice behavior analysis or, for that matter, any form of teaching or therapy, should require the ability to transport effective procedures from laboratory to clinic.

A Behavior Analyst's Challenge

Unique contributions of behavior analysis have been the countless demonstrations, within and outside the laboratory, of how to use positive reinforcers effectively to teach new behavior and of how to relate behavior appropriately to the physical and social environments. It is not correct for behavior analysts, or for members of any of the "helping professions," to claim that their training qualifies them to use punishment and negative reinforcement. No degree that I know of qualifies its recipient to use coercion. Coercive therapy requires no special training; one does not need a degree in behavior analysis, psychology, education, or any other discipline to be an expert in the use of coercion. One need only be a casual student of history.

Behavior analysts would best promote their own professional survival and at the same time contribute uniquely to society by proposing restrictions on the use of coercion in clinic and classroom. To claim that regulation is a usurpation of professional judgment is simply not correct. Everybody knows how to punish; only

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behavior analysts are explicitly trained to use positive reinforcement. The real challenge is not to devise coercive measures for treating emergencies but to prevent those emergencies from happening.

We must end our preoccupation with those who recommend and practice coercive control. Like all problem behavior, theirs is reinforced by attention, and our continued attention to their espousal of coercion will produce more of the same from them. We could use our time more effectively and contribute more constructively by practicing the alternative methods of education and treatment that are already available, by continuing research on those and additional alternatives, and by teaching and informing the public about them. Behavior analysis is a rich source of unique and successful principles and methods for countering our society's tendency to apply coercion as the general solution to social problems. Behavior analysts have an obligation, not to follow but to lead.