PLANNED BEHAVIOR CHANGE: BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION IN SOCIAL WORK

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Harvey L. Gochros

Planned Behavior Change

Behavior Modification in Social Work

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For Ursula and Jean,
who have shown
that positive reinforcement
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Table 6.1 (see p. 91) reprinted from E.P. Reese, *Analysis of Human Operant Behavior* (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1966), p. 16

Table 16.1 (see p. 282) reprinted from P.A. Wisocki, "The Successful Treatment of a Heroin Addict by Covert Conditioning Techniques," *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry,* Vol. 4 (London: Pergamon Press, 1973), p. 60

Preface

One of the most enjoyable tasks in producing a book is writing the preface. It is written when a book is just about completed, and it is generally the most informal part of the book. In it, authors can let loose and say pretty much what they want to say without worrying about giving a reference. We have therefore made this preface our "M & M" for completing the manuscript.

In considering what to write in our preface, we have chosen to sit back, review what we wanted to accomplish when we set out to write this book, and reflect on how we went about doing it.

For several years, both of us have included considerable material on behavior modification in our social work practice courses. We have also taught numerous courses and workshops specifically on behavior modification. We therefore decided to use these courses as a model for the form and content of the book. Indeed, the book essentially follows the format of a course, beginning with basic concepts and principles, and going on to aspects of their application in practice, followed by illustrations of strategies of intervention into a variety of problems commonly encountered in social work practice. The book concludes with an extended discussion of ethical considerations in the application of behavior modification in social work practice, which, by being placed last, is not intended to depreciate these issues but to highlight them. The contents of the book were continuously being revised and updated on the basis of our review of new literature, feedback from our students, who were applying behavior modification in their practicum, and our own use of behavior modification with our clients.

This preface is being written at a time when the use of behavior modification is being widely questioned, not only by professionals, but also by governmental agencies and the press. Articles and letters to the editor challenging the ethics of behavior modification have appeared in such diverse places as *Time* and the *New York Review*. A federal agency has even announced that it is withdrawing financial support from any program that uses behavior modification approaches.

We know, not only from the literature, but also from our own practice and that of our students, of the good that the use of behavior modification can achieve, and we believe that its procedures can be used humanely and honestly in dealing with many areas of human suffering. We are therefore distressed at signs of emotional and often irrational rejection of behavior modification. But we are equally concerned about any incidents of inappropriate or unethical use. Behavior modification is a potentially powerful technology, and any possible misuse is to be watched for and condemned. Thus, through-

out this book we have tried to discuss how behavior modification can be used ethically and in a way consistent with social work values.

While writing the book, we were frequently concerned that our enthusiasm for the approach (fueled, perhaps, in part by our awareness of the "bad press" behavior modification often receives) could obscure the objective presentation of its application in social work practice. Indeed, one of the authors—who shall remain nameless—would have liked to include extensive, critical comparisons of behavioral approaches with some of the traditional approaches used in social work. It was thought that an exposition of the deficiencies of traditional approaches would buttress the case for the use of behavior modification. However, cooler heads (including that of the other author) prevailed. We decided to present behavior modification as much as possible strictly on its own merits, and to let the strengths of behavior modification speak for themselves. We have tried not to be overly polemical, and to make the major objective of the book, as much as possible, be to educate about behavior modification rather than to proselytize. Nevertheless, we recognize (as the reader doubtlessly will) that our enthusiasm over the potential of behavior modification for social work occasionally exceeded our self-restraint. For that, we apologize.

However, we hope that our readers will not simply accept what we say (no matter how convincing our writing style) without subjecting it to careful, critical evaluation. Our profession (like any other profession) needs to use rigorous criteria to evaluate new ideas, and not just accept them on faith. We hope that this book will help generate interest in trying out these principles in a wide range of social work practice settings with diverse clients and problems. Only then will this book have achieved its purpose.

It occurs to us that writing a book involves the same learning principles as any other set of behaviors. Just about everything we've put into this book, we've learned—from other authors, teachers, our families, friends, students, clients, and each other. Thus, it is probably inevitable that there are places in the book where credit was not given when credit was due. Incorporating the ideas of hundreds of people as we have done, there were times when we may not have adequately distinguished between their ideas and our own. Although we have tried to document carefully the sources of our material, we may inadvertently have neglected some references. We therefore would like to acknowledge by this statement our debt to these unnamed, but appreciated, sources. In the case of figures and tables we have adapted from other sources, we hereby express our appreciation for use of this material, and also indicate beneath each item the place of publication of the original. Figures and tables without source lines are our work entirely.

Several people whose names and affiliations are quite well known to us have made significant contributions to this book, and we do want to thank them for their considerable help:

Dr. Herbert Aptekar, who was our Dean at the School of Social Work, University of Hawaii when this book was being developed, and whose recent death was a great loss both to us personally and to social work as a whole, created an academic atmosphere that reinforced the time and effort we put into the book.

Dr. William R. Morrow, one of the pioneers in organizing behavior modification research for application with human problems, introduced one of the authors to the potential of behavior modification for social work, and stimulated that interest over the years.

Dr. Larry Lister, our colleague and friend at the School of Social Work, University of Hawaii, read the first draft and made numerous invaluable suggestions that were incorporated in subsequent drafts.

Jean S. Gochros reviewed and helped revise major segments of the manuscript at various stages of its development.

Jolene Takita, still in high school at the time, typed almost the entire first draft of the manuscript in a highly professional manner.

Our wives, Ursula and Jean, and our children, Susan, David, Lisa, and Nicole by their support, suggestions, and enthusiasm (kids are great at alphabetizing bibliographies) contributed more than they will ever know to the completion of this book. In fact, after spending so many weekends enjoying Hawaii's beautiful beaches without us, our families have become so used to it, and have grown so much to enjoy each other's company without our interference, that we are constantly being asked by them to quickly get involved in *another* book.

To all these people goes our deepest appreciation for their help and support. Which brings us to us. Our own friendship—despite almost daily confrontations over the progress, form, style, and content of the book—has remained miraculously intact, if not stronger for the experience. For this we are reciprocally relieved and grateful.

Introduction

The field of social work is changing at an unprecedented rate. Today's social workers, charged with the same concern, energy, and social commitment as their predecessors, are both responding to, and creating demands on, the field to adjust to a rapidly changing world with new perceptions of the problems of the people the profession serves. They are seeking orientations for their practice which will lead to effective, efficient, and rational interventions reflecting the rights, competence, and intelligence of the consumers of their services.

Nowhere is this change more evident than in social work education. After decades of educational conformity, students are now exposed to programs presenting different content, focus, orientation, and even time required for completion. The profession seems on the verge of moving from rigid uniformity to questioning of much of the fabric of social work practice and philosophy.

There is indeed a pressing demand for a realistic examination of the theoretical underpinnings and methodology of social work services. Critics of social work practice point to several problems in the field, particularly involving practice with individuals and families experiencing problems in their social functioning (see, e.g., Briar, 1967; Fischer, 1973; Fischer, 1975 a & b). These problems involve not only the conceptual and technological deficiencies of many traditional theories of practice, but also include serious questions regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of practitioners who adhere to such approaches.

In view of these concerns, it is not surprising that many social workers have shown interest in the principles and methodology of behavior modification. This approach has much to offer for social work practice in the areas where most traditional approaches have been deficient: (1) It respects the integrity of the client by focusing on observed behavior and limiting itself to helping diminish maladaptive functioning and increase adaptive functioning. (2) There is accumulating research evidence of the effectiveness of behavior modification procedures with a variety of problem situations. Furthermore, the fact that each case in which behavior modification is used allows for—indeed demands —specifying the problematic behaviors and systematically recording the changes in these behaviors, leads to testing the effectiveness of the procedure with each situation. Thus, the practitioner along with the client knows clearly whether goals have been achieved, and does not have to rely on the vagaries of intuition.

(3) There is a clear, logical connection between the assessment of the case (i.e., what specific current conditions maintain dysfunctional behavior of the client or impede the development of functional behavior), and the resulting intervention plan for modifying the behavior by changing these conditions (what factors in the environment may be used differentially to affect the behavior of the client in a helpful direction). (4) The basic principles of behavior modification are clear and easily communicated. They may be taught to nonprofessional personnel and individuals within the natural environment of the client, thereby giving such personnel an effective, easily comprehensible method of assisting in the process of altering dysfunctional behavior. (5) The behavior modification approach has generated numerous specific procedures which the social worker can differentially apply depending on the nature of the problem, situation, and client. (6) The behavior modification approach is efficient. Many cases and situations can be handled more quickly and with less professional time, either directly or by utilizing people in the client's natural environment, than is possible with other approaches. This is an especially useful consideration in view of the increasing concern about the economic use of the limited manpower available in social work programs. (7) The behavior modification approach encourages "self therapy" by the client himself by teaching him how to arrange the conditions which affect his behavior outside the interview situation. In this process, the client becomes better equipped to handle future problems without the need of professional help. (8) Behavior modification is oriented toward prevention. As noted above, parents, teachers, and others within the natural environment of the client may be taught change procedures, supervised in their administration by social work personnel, in order to more directly affect the behavior in the individual. Beyond this, these same persons may also be taught a perspective for observing and changing behavior—explicit principles and procedures which can be applied beyond the immediate problem situation—either to avoid future problems or to deal with them as they occur, so they need not seek professional help for future difficulties. (9) There is a wide range of applicability of behavior modification both in terms of problems and clients. The procedures of behavior modification have been effectively applied with individuals from upper and lower income groups, including clients without skills at verbal communication. Behavior modification has been effectively used with clients typically seen in family service agencies, outpatient clinics, and with a range of people and problems that traditionally have been considered "hopeless," "retarded," "autistic," back ward residents in psychiatric hospitals, delinquents, and so on. (10) Behavior modification provides principles and procedures for socioenvironmental change, to be applied directly with people, or in altering their natural ecology, the systems of which they are a part. Further, these basic principles are the same at all levels of intervention—individual, family, group, social system. Thus, social workers are provided with a technology with major implications for enhancing a range of practice endeavors, including the development of more desirable large-scale designs for living through social planning and social engineering. (11) Behavior modification is compatible with major ideas of other current conceptual frameworks utilized in social work practice which attempt to understand and modify human behavior in terms of its environmental context, such as role theory, system theory and group dynamics. Thus, these approaches—and a range of others with empirical evidence of success—can supplement behavior modification and its base in learning theory to give a more comprehensive view both of interpersonal behavior and, more importantly for social work, intervention into human problems.

Basic Definitions

Before proceeding any further, it is important to develop a few basic definitions of terms that will be used regularly in this book (see, also, the Glossary). The social worker unfamiliar with the terminology of a new approach would almost naturally tend to be more reluctant to explore the applicability of that approach. This often seems to be the case with behavior modification which, for some, appears to present many of the hazards that exist in learning a new language. But most of the basic terms of behavior modification are actually uncomplicated and concise.

"Behavior," e.g., is simply "what people do." Behavior includes such activities as studying, running, crying, kissing, touching, and, so far as the behavioral approach goes, actually includes any observable or measurable movement, task or activity of a human being, whether this be internal (within the individual) or external (Reese, 1966). As can be seen, this is a far-reaching definition of behavior. But as long as the behavior is somehow measurable (even "anxiety" is measurable by verbal reports, the use of equipment to measure pulse rate, perspiration, etc.), then it is appropriate to the task of behavior modification. Of course, such behaviors as eyeblinks are indeed behaviors. But the emphasis in behavior modification is on *significant* behaviors—those that have some implication for the individual's personal or social functioning. It may be a major behavior, of great value to an individual—e.g., sexual behaviors of husband or wife—or a relatively minor behavior—e.g., a twinge of anxiety before an exam for a student—but if its effect is to produce dysfunctional consequences for that individual, it would be an appropriate target for intervention using behavior modification procedures.

Behavior modification recognizes that much of human behavior is learned. Genetic predispositions and biological differences are of course recognized, but the focus of behavior modification is on those behaviors that are learned. A learned behavior is one that has developed as a result of interaction with the environment. In fact, the environment serves a dual role of not only teaching new behaviors, but evoking behaviors that were previously learned. Thus, the concept of functional relationship with the environment—wherein changes in one part of a relationship produce or lead to changes in the other part—is crucial for both assessment and intervention in the behavioral approach. Changes in an individual's behavior can produce changes in his environment, while changes in the environment can produce changes in an individual's behavior. Of course, one of the most important environments for people is other people, and it is easy to think of countless examples where our behavior is changed—e.g., we become more happy or sad, active or passive—in relationship to the behaviors of those around us.

In the literature generally, the terms "behavior modification" and "behavior therapy" often are used synonymously, although some writers prefer to consider behavior therapy as denoting one "branch" of the field (utilizing respondent principles) and behavior modification to refer to another branch (utilizing operant principles). However, given the general focus on measurable behavior and learning as discussed above, behavior modification will generally be defined, for purposes of this book, as the planned, systematic application of experimentally established principles of learning to the modification of maladaptive behavior.

There are several important concepts embedded in this definition. "Maladaptive behavior" can be viewed as behavior that has dysfunctional or harmful

consequences for the individual or his environment. The social worker using behavior modification would attempt to either decrease the occurrence of maladaptive behavior, or increase the occurrence of (or help people learn when to engage in) adaptive behavior. The worker would do this in a planned and purposeful way; choice of procedures would not be haphazard or arbitrary but would be specifically derived from the worker's assessment of the problem, situation and the individuals and environments involved. In fact, behavior modification is not really a single, uniform entity, but a combination of procedures based on systematic application to the resolution of human problems of experimentally validated principles of human behavior. The social worker using behavior modification could call upon a wide variety of procedures that have been demonstrated in both laboratory and practice research to have the capability of bringing about predictable changes in human behavior. Thus, chances for failure in work with clients are considerably diminished. And, because the focus of this approach is on measurable behavior and systematic application of learning principles, the social worker using behavior modification would be careful to collect data on his progress—to be certain as to whether or not his program is succeeding. If anything, this systematic, empirical (or research) standard is the trademark of behavior modification. Although this book is specifically about behavior modification, the real commitment of the authors, and hopefully many other social workers, is to the use of the empirical model on which behavior modification is based—research, systematic application of demonstrated principles, development of techniques to implement principles, methods for studying results, and, above all, commitment to the quest for effective practice.

Finally, several other terms are used frequently in this book. The first is the term "client." Consistent with conventional social work terminology the client is the person (or group or system) who either is the expected beneficiary of social work intervention; or who engages, or contracts for, the services of the social worker; or the person(s) whose behavior the social worker attempts to change. Of course, the person who engages the services of the social worker may or may not be the same person as the one whose behavior is actually the target for change (Pincus & Minahan, 1970; 1973). For example, a mother might come to an agency seeking help in child management. The social worker could directly attempt to change the child's behavior, and/or provide direct services to the mother. If the social worker developed a plan for changing the behavior of the child that was to be implemented by the mother, the mother would then be the "mediator" (Tharp & Wetzel, 1969). The mediator is the person who actually carries out the behavior modification plan in direct contact with the individual(s) whose behaviors are targeted for change (e.g., dispensing reinforcers). This person could be the social worker, another professional or non-professional staff member in a given institution (e.g., a teacher or ward attendant), or someone else from the natural environment of the client (e.g., a parent).

Finally, the behavioral plan generally focuses on "target behavior," the last term to be defined here. Target behavior is behavior that specificially is pinpointed or "targeted" for change, either because it is undesired and needs to be decreased, or because it is desired and needs to be increased.

These are a few of the basic dimensions of the behavior modification approach. The characteristics of this approach will be amplified and discussed throughout this book, in chapters dealing with both the basic concepts and principles of behavior modification, and illustrating their application to a variety of practice problems of importance to social work.

Applicability to Social Work Practice

Behavior modification literature is growing rapidly with reports of successful applications of its basic procedures. These procedures have been applied to a constantly broadening range of problems experienced by people of all ages, ethnic and economic groups, educational and intellectual levels, and who are served in various settings, both open (such as family agencies and psychiatric clinics) and closed (such as mental institutions). As the field of behavior modification is further refined, an infinite number of additional applications likely will be developed, since research on the basic processes of human behavior and its relation to the environment has been inherent in the behavioral model since its inception. It is likely, however, that most new developments in the field will build on the basic knowledge that is presented in this text, since, in recent years, research and practice continue to reflect elaborations on what now appears to be this core set of concepts and principles.

Although the focus of this book is on dysfunctional behaviors of individuals and families, it should not be assumed that behavior modification is therefore applicable only to such situations. Basically, behavior modification is concerned with the impact of the environment on the behavior of human beings. Since one person's behavior is the environment of others, and people are constantly affecting each other's behavior, behavior modification can be equally applicable, and in some instances has already been extended, to understanding and affecting interactive behaviors of not only individuals and families, but of committees, peer groups, formal and informal structures of social agencies, and other collectivities (Burgess & Bushell, 1969). Social workers have long been concerned with the concept of the interplay of man and his environment. People in interaction with their community, their jobs, their family, their friends is the focus which provides the keystone of the behavior modificaton approach.

Further, as the definition of behavior used in this book is intended to indicate, behavior modification does not deal simply with isolated, discrete behaviors, but with a whole complex of observable, measurable tasks and activities. In fact, the socio-environmental emphasis of behavior modification, with a focus on the whole person and change goals involving social functioning, is highly congruent with the type of knowledge that has been described as central for the development of a common base for social work practice (Bartlett, 1970). The point is that, as this book should illustrate, the clients, problems, and settings for the practice of behavior modification are entirely consistent with similar focal points in the practice of social work. In fact, social workers are in the front line of practice in many of the areas where behavior modification has been utilized with demonstrable success.

Current State of Development

The basic theoretical work on which much of behavior modification is based is less than 50 years old. It stems largely from the work on human learning of Skinner (1953), Watson (1930), Hull (1943) and Pavlov (1928); (see Yates, 1970, Chapters 1 & 2 and Ullmann & Krasner, 1969, 1973, for an historical review of the development of behavior modification). The direct application of these theories to human problems is much newer. Much of the "early works" in this area date from the late 1950's (see, e.g., Ullmann & Krasner, 1966, for a collection of some of the earlier case studies).

Yet professionals have long observed the phenomenon of interpersonal influence. Most of us engage in it constantly as we try to influence the behavior or thoughts of our own children, agency staff, students, clients and even people holding political power. In recent years there has been a growing effort to try to find the principles of this influence and test out hypotheses regarding those principles. This has been done largely by psychologists working first in the laboratory and increasingly in the clinics and community. The newness of their discoveries adds to the excitement of the field: most of the founders and leaders in this area are still alive and professionally active. New applications are reported monthly, to the point where literally thousands of illustrations have appeared in a variety of professional journals, several of which have been established to deal solely with reports of progress in behavior modification.* And between the years of 1950 and 1973, hundreds of books have been published on behavior modification, most of which are listed in the bibliography for the convenience of the reader. Yet this excitement and newness creates some problems, especially in the area of interpretation and communication. New vocabularies have had to be developed and used for communication among people doing this work. Agreement on some concepts is still not universal. However, most of the disagreement is on an academic level with strong consensus on the basic principles and ideas of behavioral assessment and change.

Finally, behavior modification is essentially borrowed knowledge developed largely by other disciplines. There are problems inherent in the process of adoption of borrowed knowledge. There are hazards of borrowing out-of-date knowledge with greater certainty because it is borrowed, and of borrowing oversimplified versions of knowledge. All too often, the borrowed knowledge remains an "undigested lump" in the body of the profession, rather than being incorporated specifically into practice (see Kadushin, 1959). Although these dangers do exist, one hopes these pitfalls can be avoided by presenting current thinking regarding the application of behavior modification in a manner appropriate to social work in practice.

Purpose and Organization of the Book

Despite the apparent appropriateness of behavior modification knowledge for social work, and the huge outpouring of articles and books on this subject in other fields, relatively little has been taught in graduate schools of social work in the past regarding behavior modification, and indeed only a few schools now seem to offer more than a cursory review of the approach. Most of the knowledge of social workers who are testing out the behavioral approaches in practice comes from the very few references which have appeared in the social work literature (e.g., Thomas, 1968; Gambrill *et al.*, 1971; Carter & Stuart, 1970; Thomas, 1967; Jehu *et al.*, 1972; Nagoshi 1969), from often misunderstood literature written for the field of psychology by psychologists, and from colleagues in other disciplines. This book was written with the intention of presenting the basic concepts and approaches of behavior modification within the context of socal work values and with awareness of the special problems involved in applying this approach in social work settings.

* See, e.g., *Behavior Research & Therapy, Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, Behavior Therapy & Experimental Psychiatry, Behavior Therapy, Behavior Modification Monographs, Journal of Behavioral Education, School Applications of Learning Technology.*

It is the intention of the authors to make available in a concise manner the conceptual framework of behavior modification, assessment procedures, and the interventive processes for utilization in social work practice. A variety of behavior modification techniques will be offered with the hope that they will be tried in various social work settings with diverse client problems. Special emphasis is placed on a creative use of social work manpower to involve those in the client's environment in the change process.

To accomplish the above goals the book has been organized into four parts:

Part 1. Basic Concepts and Principles

Covers both respondent and operant behavior modification with special emphasis on the latter, including antecedents, consequences, reinforcers and schedules of reinforcement. Also includes a chapter on modeling.

Part 2. Process and Practice

Overviews of the assessment and intervention process, the techniques of behavior modification, behavioral recording and work in the natural environment.

Part 3. Applications and Illustrations

Selected examples of the use of behavior modification in ten major problem areas.

Part 4. Problems and Issues

A review and discussion of some of the problems involved in using behavior modification, plus several of the major issues in the use of behavior modification.

Of the two major branches of the field of behavior modification—operant and respondent (these terms will be discussed in depth in subsequent chapters)—this book focuses largely on the former, that involving operant principles and procedures. This is because it appears that this area has somewhat broader applicability for social work, because source works on operant behavior modification are more scattered and diffuse than those dealing with respondent procedures (e.g., Wolpe, 1969, 1973), and because the range of techniques for dealing with common social work problems—and for teaching others to deal with them—appears to be greater using the operant framework. On the other hand, a balanced perspective requires specification of principles and procedures from the gamut of behavioral approaches, especially those with evidence of effectiveness. Since the operant and respondent approaches have much in common, both perspectives will be dealt with, along with the modeling perspective, and, where possible, integrated for purposes of social work intervention.

It is not proposed that behavior modification be the sole approach to social work intervention. Many of the goals and activities of social work practice are either outside the boundaries of behavior modification as an intervention strategy, or are in early stages of development in behavior modification. For instance, mobilizing, modifying, and providing material services and resources is a major area of social work activity. Assisting individuals to make decisions—within the context of a nurturing interpersonal relationship—is perhaps one of the unique and best developed areas of social work practice and is a major component of most social work helping. A whole range of common social work

interventive practices involving community and societal change remain virtually untapped in the behavior modification literature.

Furthermore, we do not suggest that behavior modification and its core in learning theory should necessarily be presented as a complete explanation of the development of human behavior. Human behavior is a complex phenomenon resulting from equally complex forces. We do take the position, however, that a technology that is effective in modifying behavior should be examined in its own right. The issue of its theoretical or practical relationship to theory regarding the development of that behavior, while important, must remain secondary. This is particularly true for a profession such as social work, with its mandate to intervene into the processes of, and bring about positive changes in, human problems.

It is hoped that the behavior modification approach will be equally interesting and provocative to undergraduate and to graduate social work students, as well as to experienced social workers. Perhaps this book can provide some of the beginning encouragement to attempt those first difficult steps of implementing a new approach in practice, an approach that offers substantial potential benefits for improving our practice methodologies, and ultimately, benefitting our clients.

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