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Learning to Modify Behavior
of Children at a Summer Camp
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What is behavior modification? It is a process in which the end result is the achievement of a new behavior, or the increase in the frequency (or duration or quality) of a desirable behavior, or the decrease in the frequency or duration of an undesirable behavior. This process involves several steps: 1) behavior modifier writes down one specific behavior of himself or herself or another individual that he or she would like to modify (the behavior must be clearly defined in behavioral terms), 2) take a baseline or measure of how often or how frequently behavior is occurring before the intervention program is implemented (baseline should be observed and recorded for around 7 days if possible), 3) decide on the details of the intervention program, such as what reinforcements will be used and what schedule of reinforcement will be utilized, 4) implement program for at least six weeks and observe and record target behavior, 5) compare baseline data to data obtained when intervention was in effect, 6) and lastly, make decision to continue with program exactly how it is, or to modify it, or to discard it completely.

My previous description of behavior modification is not directly from one book; rather, I have constructed my own meaning of what behavior modification is by integrating the knowledge I have gained about behavior modification from eight different classes at Truman State University with three major real-life learning events I have had with behavior modification. Seven of the eight classes are psychology classes and one of them is a special education class. There is a lot of overlap in the information that I learned in each class, but I did learn new pieces of information and new perspectives in each class that I took.

Description of Knowledge About Behavior Modification Gained in Eight Classes

In the spring of 1996, I took General Psychology. This was my first exposure to behavior modification in college. In General Psychology, I learned about operant and classical conditioning. It is amazing how B.F. Skinner's experiments with pigeons and rats (operant conditioning) and Ivan Pavlov's experiments with dogs (classical conditioning) have led humans to many excellent ways to modify human behavior. Thus, these early experiments provide the

backbone for all that has been discovered in the area of human behavior modification. In General Psychology, I also learned about different behavior modification tools such as positive and negative reinforcement, punishment, shaping, etc. The following four schedules of reinforcement were covered in that class also: fixed interval, variable interval, fixed ratio, and variable ratio.

In the fall of 1996, I took Experimental Psychology. I again learned about Skinner's and Pavlov's experiments, but this time more in depth than in General Psychology. In the spring of 1997, I learned more about behavior modification in Physiological Psychology and Applied Psychology. In Physiological Psychology, I learned what is physiologically happening to an individual when they engage in particular behaviors. For instance, when people drink alcohol, they usually are positively reinforced. With alcohol, the positive reinforcement is caused by the presence of an appetitive stimulus, which is related to the release of dopamine by neurons of the tegmentoatrial system (Carlson, 1985). Thus, behavior can be viewed from a physiological perspective. The more I look at different perspectives, the more I understand behavior and behavior modification.

In Applied Psychology, I learned the ABC's of behavior. The A refers to antecedents, which are items such as: possible causes of behavior, people around when behavior occurs, and other contexts occurring before the behavior occurs. The B is behavior, which means what the behavior is in exact behavioral terms. C is for consequence, and it is necessary to find out if the person is getting something they want or getting out of something by engaging in a particular behavior. In addition to learning the ABC's of behavior, I learned many different possible situations or environments in which behavior modification can be applied. Behavior modification can be utilized to: teach a child with a disability to brush his or her teeth, increase productivity in the workplace, help an individual quit smoking, etc. The possibilities are endless!

During the fall of 1997, I learned even more about behavior modification in Developmental Psychology. Most of the material on behavior modification I already knew from

other classes, but I did learn more about how behavior modification tools can be used with children and adolescents. The following semester, I took two more classes in which behavior modification was covered. In History and Systems of Psychology, I learned how the field of behavior modification started (this goes back to operant and classical conditioning). In a special education class titled Counseling Students with Disabilities, I role played with my classmates and pretended that I was a teacher discussing with a parent the individualized behavior modification plan I had created for his or her child. I also got to role-play the part of the parent.

Currently, I am taking the class titled Behavior Modification. Much of the content of the class has been covered in other classes, but I am still learning a lot of important information. I am learning more tools of behavior modification, such as fading, and more schedules of reinforcement, such as limited-responding DRL (differential reinforcement of low rates).

First Learning Event

Now that I have discussed my eight classes, I will discuss my application of the knowledge I gained in those classes to three major learning events in my life. The first event took place the summer of 1996 at a summer camp. For eight weeks I worked with a nine-year old girl who is behaviorally disordered. I created and implemented a behavior modification program for her.

First, I clearly defined her behavior and looked at the ABC's of her behavior. She threw tantrums which sometimes were so severe that I had to restrain her so she would not hurt other people or myself. Most of the times she had tantrums after swimming was over. She often refused to get out of the water when the whistle was blown. Sometimes she engaged in tantrums when her daily routine was changed due to the weather. The consequence of her behavior was that she would get attention from counselors and campers.

I did not do the second step of the process of behavior modification, because I was not aware of what a baseline was or the importance of it. The third step involves creating a detailed behavior modification plan. I had already used what Roger von Oech would call my explorer to seek out information about behavior modification in my General Psychology class, so I was

ready to use my artist to turn my resources or gathered information into new ideas (Oech, 1986). I thought of many different ideas that would work and then my judge (Oech, 1986) decided which ideas to keep.

I decided to give her three rules: participate in activities, listen to counselors, and keep hands and feet to yourself. She made up a fourth rule "no hitting or kicking", and even though it was the same as my third rule, I let her keep it because it gave her a sense of power. If she obeyed the four rules, then she would not be tantrumming (which was the undesirable target behavior). I told her the rules the first day of the intervention program and after that asked her to tell me the rules every day. The learning process went faster because I made sure she was aware of the rules and consequences.

I decided to use the behavior modification tools of positive reinforcement (positive reinforcement is associated with operant conditioning, not classical conditioning) and extinction. When the girl followed the four rules throughout the day she would get a positive reinforcer such as a blow pop or some small toy and I would also praise her, and when she did not follow the rules she did not get reinforcement. The schedule of reinforcement was a fixed interval because at the end of each camp day she would get her reinforcement if she earned it. I used extinction (extinction is when a person is no longer reinforced for their behavior and so the behavior gets eliminated) when I stopped giving her attention and tried to make sure others stopped giving her attention when she tantrummed.

For the fourth step of the process, I used my warrior to carry my idea into action (Oech, 1986). In other words, I implemented the intervention program for about six weeks. I observed her behavior during this time, and wrote about instances of tantrumming; however, I did not record the frequency or duration of her tantrums.

As a result of not having baseline data and intervention data, I could not really do the fifth step which was to tell if my intervention program had made a difference. But, the child's non-biological mother (who was a special education teacher and really knew behavior modification well) told me that my plan had succeeded in decreasing the frequency and duration

of her tantrums. By the time I got to the sixth step, camp was over so I did not continue with the intervention program.

Throughout the whole six step process, I had what Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) call learning conversations with myself and with the child's non-biological mother and my supervisor. As an introvert, I tend to have more learning conversations with myself than with other people. I usually solve problems better when I think them through by myself, as opposed to solving them by talking about them with others. However, this was a difficult problem and I found out that I did not know everything I needed to know to solve it. Thus, I had to have learning conversations with the child's mother and my supervisor. They helped me out tremendously. Because I am an introvert, when I had these learning conversations with others, I found it very important for me to be able to think about what I wanted to discuss with them before I actually did discuss.

Second Learning Event

The second learning event also took place at a summer camp (the summer of 1998), but the event involved a different child, with a different disability (fragile-X syndrome), and very different behavior problems. Unlike the girl who had a behavioral excess (tantrumming), the boy I worked with had a behavioral deficit: he did not participate in any of the activities. He did exhibit other problem behaviors such as swearing at a particular counselor and his swim instructor; however, I only did a behavior modification program for his behavior of not participating in activities. With behavior modification programs, only one behavior at a time is supposed to be targeted for improvement.

Thus, I chose the target behavior of not participating in activities. I defined the behavior as: not being with his group and not doing what the group was supposed to be doing (such as listening, discussing, or making something). To get out of activities, he would ask (in a very whiny voice) to go to the nurse to get medicine for his mosquito bites, and then he would want to ask the counselors in the office hundreds of questions before he finally would go back outside (only to go around to all the other groups to see what they were doing). A need that he might

have been meeting by wandering around is his need for freedom.

In addition, he would get out of participating in swim lessons by not getting in the water or by swimming all over in the pool when he was supposed to be in one area of the pool with his swim class. Possibly, he might have done this to get attention from another counselor and his swim instructor.

I struggled to figure out why this boy was not participating in camp activities. Most kids did participate and they had a great time. Glasser's control theory axiom gives us an explanation for behavior: what students (and all of us) do in school (and out) is completely determined by the pictures in their heads (Glasser, 1986). It is likely that the boy's mental photo album (Glasser, 1986) did not have many or any positive pictures of himself participating in camp activities. In the past, he might have tried the activities and failed at them and thus given up. His mother did tell me that he hated sports because he was not good at them, and sports was one of our camp activities. I tried to get the boy to participate in activities and let him prove to himself that he could succeed, so that he could put new positive pictures in his mental photo album.

I did not take a baseline of the number of activities per day he participated in before the intervention started. Even though I had been taught to take baseline data, I did not think to do it. I knew from observations that he did not participate much at all. I later learned in my Applied Psychology class that just observing and having a general idea of the amount of the behavior is not good enough; rather, baseline data must be taken in order to really ascertain if the intervention has had an effect.

After deciding the one behavior I wanted to focus on, I made a detailed intervention plan. The boy had two rules: participate in activities and listen to counselors. Of course, I explained to him exactly what these two rules meant. I talked to his mother to ask her what would be a good reinforcer for her son and she said that there were only two things he really liked-- following his brother around and playing video games. However, I could not use these reinforcers at camp.

My explorer (Oech, 1986) failed to look for enough information, because I did not even ask the boy what he would have liked as a reinforcer. I just decided to give him two jelly belly candies after every activity (fixed interval schedule of reinforcement) in which he participated and listened.

After deciding on the rules, schedule of reinforcement, and type of reinforcement, I implemented the plan. It did not seem to be working (I can not say that for certain because I did not record baseline data). I tried to figure out what was wrong. He told me that he hated jelly bellies (his reinforcer), however I think he might just have been trying to get a reaction out of me because he had eaten them for weeks. I decided to change the reinforcer anyway, because the plan did not seem to be working. I figured out something else that was incredibly reinforcing to him--playing UNO. From then on, I made playing UNO the reinforcer. His getting to play UNO was contingent upon his following the two rules. This change in the reinforcer seemed to cause an increase in his participation; yet, I can not say for certain if it really did because I did not record any data. I stuck with the plan for the rest of the summer, and it worked pretty well.

Third Learning Event

The third learning event was an assignment in my Applied Psychology class which involved creating a personal behavior modification plan for myself. This event is similar to the first two in that throughout the learning event I had learning conversations with myself and others, and I used the four roles (explorer, artist, judge, and warrior) that Roger von Oech (1986) discusses in one of his books. I used my explorer to look for all the information I could find on behavior modification from my book and my class notes. I then used my artist to think of a behavior that I wanted to work on and to think of a creative plan. My judge decided which ideas would work and then my warrior implemented my ideas.

The behavior I chose to modify is the number of times I exercised per week. For this learning event I took baseline data. For each week, if I exercised four times (at least 20 minutes per time) I would give myself the reinforcer of watching one-half hour of television. If I exercised at least four times per week for five full weeks then I would get a peanut buster parfait

from Dairy Queen. After taking a week of baseline data, I implemented the plan for five weeks. I recorded the number of times that I exercised per week throughout the five weeks. For this learning event, I was actually able to compare my baseline data with the data from the five week period because I had recorded both sets of data. I was successful in my program and so I bought myself a peanut buster parfait. However, after I finished the assignment I did not keep doing the plan and the amount of times per week that I exercised went down. I did not maintain my behavior and maintaining the behavior is an important part of behavior modification.

Conclusion

After taking eight classes in which behavior modification was covered and experiencing three major learning events where I applied what I had learned in my classes, I understand behavior modification pretty well. I will definitely use behavior modification plans when I become a special education teacher. Additionally, as a special education teacher, I will probably have the chance to teach behavior modification to other teachers and parents. This most likely will allow me to understand behavior modification even better.

Modifying behavior was (and will continue to be) important to me because it met the five basic needs: to survive, to belong and love, to gain power, to be free, and to have fun (Glasser, 1986). Modifying behavior met my need for survival because I would not have emotionally survived as a camp counselor if I had not implemented behavior plans for the two children I worked with. (If I become a special education teacher, I will definitely not survive without some type of behavior modification plan for my students.) My need to belong and love were met because I felt part of a group when I worked at camp and I loved working with the children. A sense of power came after having success at modifying the behavior of children and myself. Also, I felt freedom because I created the types of behavior modification plans that I chose. Finally, my need to have fun was met in working with coworkers and children.

Closing Discussion About This Paper and the Class Discussions on This Paper

Through writing this paper and having in-class discussions about it, I have become a Self Organized Learner (Harri-Augstein and Thomas, 1991) in the area of behavior modification.

Self Organized Learning involves reflection, awareness, and conversations with ourselves and others (Harri-Augstein and Thomas, 1991). I did much reflecting on my three real life applications of behavior modification. I thought about what caused success with my plans and what caused failure, so that in the future I can make better plans. In addition, I became aware of how I learned to modify behavior and this awareness will help me to teach others behavior modification. Lastly, throughout the paper and class discussions I had learning conversations with myself and others.

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