REINFORCING SELF-HELP GROUP ACTIVITIES OF WELFARE RECIPIENTS¹

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The attendance rates of welfare recipients at self-help group meetings was compared when supplementary reinforcement was given for attending and when it was not. Reinforcers included donated items, such as clothing and household goods, and information about welfare services. It was found that the attendance at meetings averaged three recipients per meeting without reinforcement and 15 recipients per meeting with reinforcement. There was evidence that attendance was associated with participation in other self-help activities. It was concluded that practical forms of reinforcement can be found to maintain the participation of severely disadvantaged populations in self-help groups.

Applied behavior analysis has been defined as the application of behavior analysis to the solution of socially relevant problems (Baer, Wolf, and Risley, 1968). Socially relevant situations thus studied have included mental hospital wards (Ayllon and Azrin, 1969), classrooms (Hall, Lund, and Jackson, 1968), preschools (Bushell, Wrobel, and Michaelis, 1968), autistic children (Lovaas, Schaeffer, and Simmons, 1965) and a variety of individual behavior problems. In these situations it has been found that reinforcement procedures can be used to increase the occurrence of "desirable" behaviors. This provides some evidence that behavior analysis can be successfully applied to a wide variety of socially relevant problems.

With its strong emphasis on socially relevant problems, it is not surprising that behavior analysis has begun to be applied to the behavioral components of poverty. For example, a number of studies have been directed at improving the educational attainment of low income youths (Wolf, Giles, and Hall, 1968; Bushell and Jacobson, 1969; Jacobson, Bushell, and Risley, 1969; Clark, Lachowicz, and Wolf, 1968; Miller, 1968; Hart and Risley,

1968). Another study has been directed at increasing the rate of "desirable" behaviors among institutionalized juvenile offenders, (Phillips, 1968). These studies provide some evidence that behavior analysis can also be successfully applied to some of the problems posed by poverty conditions.

However, poor persons are increasingly rejecting approaches to poverty based solely on changing their behavior to conform to existing institutions. They are demanding that existing institutions be changed and even that new institutions be invented. This demand requires not only behavioral changes on the part of poor persons, but also changes on the part of other segments of our society. Thus, a more complete approach to the conditions that cause and maintain poverty may require changing the behavior of both poor persons and others in ways that do not conform to existing institutional requirements.

Part of this more complete approach to poverty has focused on creating new organizations composed and governed exclusively by poor persons and directed toward planning and executing programs for their own benefit (Clinebard, 1966). Self-help programs sponsored by these groups include self-improvement through education, cooperatives, and other business enterprises, the organization of pressure groups, and the development of groups to improve neighborhood and housing conditions. The successful establishment of self-help groups requires behavioral change among both the poor and the rest of the community. However, these groups can be a potent force

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for creating the social change necessary to deal with poverty conditions.

If self-help groups are to be successful agents for social change they must be capable of attracting and maintaining the participation of poor persons. In behavioral terms, this would mean that participation must result in reinforcement if it is to be maintained. One might guess that the long-range, and often indirect benefits produced by these groups—such as cleaner neighborhoods, educational improvement, progressive government—would not be sufficiently strong reinforcers to maintain the participation of poor persons. However, there is some evidence from questionnaire and interview surveys that poor persons participate less frequently than the middle class in such voluntary groups as unions, political associations, and churches (Berelson and Steiner, 1964). This suggests that such long-range benefits may not be sufficiently strong reinforcers to maintain the participation of poor persons. If self-help groups are to provide a successful approach to poverty, a method for maintaining participation must be found.

A behavioral approach to maintaining participation requires that "participation" be specified in behavioral terms. However, this is an almost impossible task because participation is a catch-all term including attending meetings, speaking, listening, carrying out assignments, keeping minutes, and negotiating with other groups. An alternative behavioral approach is to select a particularly relevant aspect of participation that can be simply specified and investigate methods for maintaining just that aspect. In the present experiment, attendance at meetings was chosen for investigation. It is a particularly relevant aspect of participation because it is an "entry" behavior for most other aspects of participation. If a person attends meetings he can also talk, listen, keep minutes, chair the meeting, and receive assignments. Furthermore, meeting attendance is methodologically convenient in that it has a physically specifiable definition and can be directly observed.

In the present experiment, the use of supplementary reinforcement was examined as a method for maintaining meeting attendance. During two experimental periods, supplementary reinforcement was delivered. In order to assess the effect of this procedure, two control periods were instituted during which no sup-

plementary reinforcement was delivered. Thus, the present experiment evaluates the effectiveness of supplementary reinforcement in maintaining meeting attendance in comparison with the effectiveness of the reinforcers inherent in self-help groups.

METHOD

Membership

Membership in the self-help group was restricted to current recipients in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (ADC) program of a small midwestern city. In the beginning of the experiment, 94 families received ADC; by the end of the study 120 families received ADC. Of these, 52 family members participated in the self-help groups; 50 were women, two men; they ranged in age from 18 to 57 yr.

Personnel

One author served as a welfare counselor, providing assistance and information to about 50 welfare recipients in the eight months before the experiment. As a result, she was familiar with welfare problems, the welfare agency's response to such problems, and many of the relevant regulations of the agency.

Self-Help Groups

Two self-help groups were formed. The membership of each group was determined by its members, who elected a president from among themselves. All meetings except the first one were held in a member's home at a time designated by the president. Members were notified by mail of the date, time, and place of the meeting. Meetings were scheduled monthly.

Meeting Procedures

All meetings followed a formal agenda. First, roll was taken and the 25¢ dues collected and recorded. Second, the president, using the notes of the previous meeting, found out if all outstanding individual problems had been solved. Each person was specifically asked about any problem that had been described at the previous meeting. If a problem had not been solved, the group decided what further steps to take. Third, the president went over a checklist of welfare problems with each member. This checklist included questions about

whether the members received all checks on time last month; received their medical card; and received any increases or decreases in their allowances. Fourth, the members discussed new problems revealed by the checklist or brought up by members. A specific strategy for solving any new problems was arrived at through discussion. Fifth, a general discussion of other community affairs that affected group members was initiated. This ranged over such areas as urban renewal, school board policy, police problems, and city government. If members decided there was a problem, a strategy for dealing with it was decided upon. Finally, additional resources were described. These included services and used goods. Quarterly meetings of all presidents were scheduled in addition to monthly membership meetings. These meetings were designed to exchange information about strategy, agency response, and membership reaction, and to coordinate the different self-help groups.

Procedure

During the first phase of the experiment, all ADC recipients were notified by mail before each of three meetings designed to form self-help groups. The welfare counselor was present to explain the purpose of the groups, but there was no supplementary reinforcement for attending these meetings. This phase lasted for three meetings.

At the beginning of the second phase, each recipient was informed in writing of another meeting to form self-help groups. This time, however, they were offered the opportunity to select two free Christmas toys for each child in their family if they attended the meeting. At subsequent meetings of the individual self-help groups, the members in attendance were permitted to ask for any of the types of items listed in Table 1. If the item was available it was given to the recipient on the spot or arrangements were made for its delivery. If the item was not available, the member was permitted to continue making selections. If a member did not select an item, or if no acceptable items were available, then she received none for attending that meeting. Less than 10% of the requests were for unavailable items. The goods were solicited from the "concerned" middle-class community by the welfare counselor. Many items were maintained in a storage facility. Services and information

were similarly sought out by the counselor. To the extent that the counselor was unsuccessful these items were unavailable. The second phase lasted eight meetings.

Table 1
Reinforcers Available for Attending Meetings

I. <i>Goods:</i>
1. Toys
2. Stoves
3. Refrigerators
4. Furniture
5. Clothing
6. Rugs
7. Kitchen utensils
II. <i>Services:</i>
1. Assistance in negotiating an ADC grievance
2. Assistance in locating a suitable house
3. Assistance in negotiating house improvements with landlord
4. Assistance in clearing up police or court problems
5. Finding odd jobs for teenagers
6. Day camp scholarships
7. Beauty and poise classes
III. <i>Information:</i>
1. Additional ADC-grant benefits
2. Benefits from other social service agencies
3. Birth control information

The third phase was introduced when the welfare counselor discontinued attendance at meetings due to major surgery and supplementary reinforcers were not available for attending meetings. This phase lasted for eight meetings.

During the fourth and final phase the counselor again accepted invitations to meetings and thereby made reinforcers available to members who attended meetings. The president of each group was notified of this at the beginning of the first month of this phase. This phase lasted for seven meetings.

RESULTS

The average number of ADC recipients who attended the first 26 meetings of the study is shown in Fig. 1. These data show that an average of about three persons attended meetings during the first phase when the counselor was present but supplementary reinforcers were not contingent upon attending. No recipients attended during the last meeting of this phase. During the second phase, when supplementary reinforcers were given, attendance increased to an average of 15 recipi-

Fig. 1. Number of welfare recipients attending each of the first 26 meetings of the self-help groups. Recipients were given supplementary reinforcement during the periods labeled "Reinf".

Fig. 2. Cumulative number of members attending their first meeting when reinforcement was contingent on attendance (Reinf) and during periods when it was not.

ents per meeting. During the third phase, when supplementary reinforcement was not available because the counselor was absent, attendance averaged about three recipients per meeting. Finally, when supplementary reinforcement was again given (during the fourth phase), attendance increased and stabilized at an average of about 16 recipients per meeting. These data show that more recipients attended meetings when supplementary reinforcement was available to them than when it was not.

Figure 2 shows the number of new members attending each of the 26 meetings. The data show that seven attended the first meeting of the self-help groups when no supplementary reinforcement was contingent on attendance. The average rate of acquiring new members for the other 10 meetings when no supplementary reinforcement was scheduled was 0.2 per meeting; when supplementary reinforcement was scheduled the average was 2.8 for Phase 2 and 2.7 for Phase 4. A total of 52 members, or about 40% of the total persons on welfare were attracted to the groups during the course of the study. The data show, however, that members were attracted primarily when supplementary reinforcement was contingent upon attendance.

The data in Fig. 2 suggest that the overall effect of supplementary reinforcement may

have been to attract new members regularly, but not necessarily to keep them. Figure 3 shows the attendance rates for Phases 2, 3, and 4 for the 12 recipients who remained eligible for membership in the group for the entire study. Of the other nine members attending the first reinforced meeting, six moved from town, two dropped off of ADC, and one was dismissed from the club for violating the privacy of group members. The graph shows the number of those 12 who attended N per cent of the meetings for a particular phase, for each of the three phases. Thus, during the first phase that supplementary reinforcement was available, six members attended between 80 and 90% of the meetings, three members attended between 70 and 80% of the meetings, and so on. As can be seen from the graphs, most of the members attended over 50% of the meetings when supplementary reinforcement was available. On the other hand, no members attended more than 30% of the meetings when supplementary reinforcement was not available. The trends for individual subjects are similar for 10 of the 12 members, with only one member failing to show an increase during the final reinforcement phase. These data show that the reinforcement contingency maintained attendance among most of these 12 individual subjects.

Fig. 3. Per cent of meetings attended by all (12) recipients who were members during these three periods. Arrows indicate mean per cent of meetings attended during that condition.

Another method for exploring the ability of the supplementary reinforcement to both initiate and maintain attendance, is to explore attendance of all 52 members between their first meetings and the time at which they become ineligible. If we define the failure to attend four or more consecutive meetings as "dropping membership" in the group, then only seven members voluntarily dropped out.

An additional 17 became ineligible for continued membership. Thus, some level of continued attendance was maintained in 86% of the total persons that experienced the contingency at least once. Furthermore, counting all the time during which a person remained eligible from his first meeting attended, persons attended an average of 64% of all meetings scheduled. (During the periods of nonreinforcement, persons attended about 20% of all meetings). These data suggest that the use of supplementary reinforcement maintained a continued participation in the self-help groups among most persons who experienced the contingency.

One further question of interest is whether the involvement in one, highly structured self-help group "generalizes". Do members tend to become involved in other civic activities? Unfortunately, data were kept on only one aspect of such "generalization".

Figure 4 shows the number of civic groups attended by the presidents of the two self-help groups. While neither president had participated in civic affairs before joining the group, they attended over 10 new groups one or more times after joining. This participation included formal membership in the local O.E.O. governing board, the Model Cities Advisory Board, A Citizen's Advisory Board, and a school integration committee. It included attendance at meetings of the City Council, School Board, and Mayor's Youth Advisory Committee. The participation of the other members was not systematically observed, but there did seem to be some increase among them too.

Fig. 4. Number of civic groups attended by self-help group members before and after joining.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that more persons attended self-help group meetings when supplementary reinforcement was available than when it was not. The low rate when no supplementary reinforcement was scheduled, occurred whether the counselor was present (Phase 1) or absent (Phase 3). If the information and services provided by the counselor in these meetings is considered part of the supplementary reinforcement system (See Table 1), it is possible to conclude from this design that the absence of supplementary reinforcement leads to a low rate of attendance. Unfortunately the design does not definitively isolate the role of the counselor's social presence in the group meetings. Her presence in the first phase was not sufficient to maintain attendance, but possibly it would have been after a history of supplementary reinforcement. Furthermore, the presence of the counselor when supplementary reinforcement was scheduled leaves unanswered whether the attendance would continue at a high level if supplementary reinforcement could be scheduled by the group members themselves. Thus, the present experiment cannot be said to have established a procedure for developing and maintaining self-help groups unaided by outside personnel. It does clearly show that self-help groups can be aided in their formation and maintenance by a system of supplementary reinforcement delivered by a technical assistant to the group.

The present procedure did not lead to the involvement of all welfare recipients in self-help groups. In fact, strictly in terms of attendance, less than 20% participated in any one group meeting. However, the method was successful in maintaining the participation of most individuals who came into contact with the supplementary reinforcement. Few such individuals voluntarily dropped from the group (14%); while most individuals maintained a steady rate of attendance (64% attendance including those that dropped). Thus, the problem of generating greater involvement among all eligible recipients would seem to involve devising procedures for getting them to sample the reinforcement at least once. Some extension of the reinforcement sampling procedures explored by Azrin and Ayllon (1968) might be suitable. At any rate, the pres-

ent experiment would seem to establish the success of the method in maintaining attendance after that first sampling.

There is some evidence that participation in the self-help groups generalized to other forms of self help; the attendance of the presidents at civic meetings increased from none before their membership in the self-help groups to about 10 groups afterwards. Casual evidence also suggested that similar although less-pronounced increases occurred among other group members. It was also noted that an increased utilization of tutors for their children also occurred among group members. While evidence of generalization was not generated by an adequate experimental design, it is suggestive of such an effect. If such generalization does occur, it suggests that reinforcing attendance at meetings may have a kind of triggering effect leading poor persons to greater participation in controlling their own lives. Such a possibility clearly warrants further, and more careful, investigation.

Two features of the present procedures may be singled out for additional discussion: (1) the use of attendance as the target behavior; (2) the use of supplementary reinforcers.

The first major feature of the present procedure is the use of attendance as a target behavior. We see it as the first step in solving a difficult methodological problem: how to measure the success of a procedure in forming a self-help group. Previous approaches to this type of problem have relied on attitude scales and various subjective measurements (Hyman, Wright, and Hopkins, 1962) or "membership" (Clinard, 1966) which need not require participation. The use of attendance provides a directly observable approximation to "success" that can also have reinforcement contingencies applied to it. It suggests further approximations to defining a successful self-help group.

Thus, the use of attendance as a target behavior might be extended to group programs other than "meetings"; *e.g.*, attendance at adult education programs, at projects that create income for the self-help groups, and at neighborhood rehabilitation projects. The attendance of a new member at one or more meetings may also be used to define "recruitment" and the recruiter can be reinforced. Thus, as simple a behavior as attendance can be elaborated to a wide variety of projects

within self-help groups, including even the growth of membership itself. Each added project would permit a closer approximation to a successful self-help group.

Attendance might be used as a target behavior with respect to programs outside the self-help groups as well. Thus, attendance at city council, school board, and urban renewal meetings provides a further elaboration of the "success" of self-help groups.

These examples suffice to suggest that attendance could be used to measure the participation of members not only in discussion meetings, but also in a wide variety of projects within the self-help groups and between them and the broader community. Further, since it is an objective behavior, reinforcement contingencies could be specified to increase the attendance in these projects. Taken together, these elaborations of the present study would represent a significant approximation to community development goals within a behavior modification framework.

Further elaborations of the present work might take either or both of two directions. First, further specification might be undertaken of target behaviors when self-help group members meet together. Thus, different dimensions of attendance at group meetings might be specified, such as coming on time, paying dues, and bringing membership materials. Further specification might involve defining different roles within the meeting: taking attendance, recording dues payments and making a treasurer's statement, recording on a checklist individual welfare problems, making an agenda, recording minutes, and sending out notices of the next meeting. All of these target behaviors are easily observed and reinforcement criteria could be specified.

A second elaboration would involve measuring the effect of the self-help group in relation to the broader community. Thus, the effect of membership on the size of welfare benefits could be measured. The reassignment of recipients to new caseworkers, or even the termination of caseworkers could be determined. The size of the group's treasury and the size of its used-item stockpile could be additional measures. Membership in community groups such as War-on-Poverty and perhaps ultimately, the election to local office provide further measurable criteria of the success of self-help groups.

The second major feature of the procedure is the use of supplementary reinforcers. It may be thought that the low-income individual lives in a subculture which displays feelings of despair, defeatism, and powerlessness (*e.g.*, Harrington, 1962; Clinard, 1966). Consequently, community organizers sometimes emphasize the formulation of relatively minor initial goals that may be achieved immediately. This emphasis on quick success may be one way to increase the chance that the participation of the individual group member will be reinforced. The present procedure was an attempt to guarantee that members' participation would be reinforced by utilizing reinforcers that were not necessarily intrinsic to long-range group goals. These supplementary reinforcers allowed for the systematic scheduling of meaningful consequences that would maintain individual participation until other naturally available reinforcers can develop control. Such supplementary reinforcers may be imperative during the initial phases of an organization when it is not yet strong enough to guarantee group success.

Potential supplementary reinforcers can be readily obtained by organizers in almost any community. Such items as used clothing, furniture, appliances, and toys are readily available as donations from the more affluent members of the community who are "concerned" about poverty. Information about welfare policy regulations can frequently be obtained from a sympathetic caseworker or by accompanying a recipient to the welfare office to inspect the policy book. Other potential reinforcers such as tutoring services, free summer camp or day camp scholarships, admission to recreational facilities, as well as arts and crafts workshops are often available without charge.

Greater flexibility in the management of such supplementary reinforcers may be achieved through the use of a token system (Ayllon and Azrin, 1968). A self-help group might award a token to each member who attends a meeting. The members might then decide, for example, that a used refrigerator could be exchanged for 40 tokens. Four tokens (say) might be given to a person who brings a potential member to a meeting; five tokens might be given for attending a relevant public meeting (*e.g.*, school board, city planning) and reporting back to the group. Such procedures

would allow reinforcement contingencies to be attuned more sensitively to the needs of the group.

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