BEHAVIORAL COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY: TRAINING A COMMUNITY BOARD TO PROBLEM SOLVE¹

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This study demonstrated the effect of training nine lower socio-economic adults participating as policy board members in a federally funded rural community project to make behaviorally defined statements to increase problem-solving behaviors in board meetings. A multiple-baseline design across subjects and skills was used to analyze the behavioral categories of: (1) stating the *problem*; (2) finding *solutions* to the problem, and (3) implementing the *action* to the solution. Problem-solving responses during board meetings increased for subjects following training and remained higher than baseline during follow-up.

DESCRIPTORS: training problem solving, adults, rural poor, board training, behavioral community psychology, group problem solving, multiple baseline

Applied behavior analysis, which began as an experimental-therapeutic endeavor with individual subjects exhibiting deviant or undesirable behavior (Ullmann and Krasner, 1965) has broadened in scope and application such that the principles may now be applied to solve social problems. The term *Behavioral Community Psychology* seems appropriate to denote applications to socially significant problems in unstructured community settings where the behavior of individuals is not considered deviant in the traditional sense. Encouraging welfare recipients to attend self-help meetings (Miller and Miller, 1970), reinforcing the picking up of litter (Burgess, Clark, and Hendee, 1971; Chapman and Risley, 1974; Clark, Burgess, and Hendee,

1972; Kohlenberg and Phillips, 1973; Powers, Osborne, and Anderson, 1973), prompting the purchase of soft drinks in returnable bottles (Geller, Farris, and Post, 1973), and increasing bus ridership through token reinforcement (Everett, Hayward, and Meyers, 1974) are all applications of behavior principles to solve community problems. Motivating delinquents to participate in self-government (Fixen, Phillips, and Wolf, 1973), and using access to a recreation center as a reinforcer for increasing membership and reducing disruptions (Pierce and Risley, 1974) also represent promising new applications to longstanding community problems. Another area to which the principles may be relevant is in analyzing behaviors in the poor which, if strengthened or developed, might provide greater effectiveness and self-sufficiency on their part. Relevant to this approach is a study by Kifer, Lewis, Green, and Phillips (1974), which showed that conflict-resolution behavior could be analyzed and modified in parent-child pairs.

In recent years, many federally funded programs designed to help the poor (Head Start, Community Action, Model Cities, Elementary and Secondary Education Act Title I, etc.) have required the participation of low-income par-

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ents, clients, and residents in decision-making roles. This has usually taken the form of service on advisory or policy boards, often with low-income parents and community representatives constituting over 50% of those decision-making bodies (Hoffman, Jordon, and McCormick, 1971). More often than not, such participation has been ineffective. Marshall, for example, (1971) reached that conclusion after interviewing every member of the greater Los Angeles community action board and analyzing board meetings. Moreover, she found that representatives of the poor saw themselves as ineffective, as did other (non-poor) board members. Many resigned in frustration and bitterness.

One reason for the ineffectiveness of low-income representatives on a policy board is their lack of familiarity with formal group decision-making procedures. Few programs have provided the necessary training for their boards. While Head Start programs all have parents on advisory or policy boards, less than 10% provide formal training, and fewer than 20% provide informal training (Hoffman, 1974). When used at all, training has usually involved lectures and readings on procedures (*e.g.*, Robert's Rules of Order), discussion of the roles and responsibilities of board members, and review of ongoing programs, usually provided by program directors. These approaches may be supplemented by human relations training designed to increase "trust" and "communication" between board members. A review of all training programs being used by or with Office of Education and Office of Child Development programs in 1970 (Hoffman, 1970) revealed few that dealt specifically with training problem-solving behaviors of board members. Thus, a technology to teach low-income participants the necessary problem-solving skills to be effective does not exist at present. The present research sought to develop a behaviorally based program for teaching low-income members of a community board specific problem-solving skills; the program was evaluated by measuring changes in the board member's behavior during the weekly meetings.

METHOD

Subjects

Three men and six women comprising the policy board of a university sponsored but community controlled self-help education project were subjects (ages 15 to 69, $\bar{x} = 37$). The two youngest were 15-yr-old junior high-school girls. The median education level for the subjects was eighth grade in segregated rural schools. Only one board member completed the twelfth grade, two stopped during the eleventh grade, two dropped out in the eighth grade, two subjects never completed the fourth grade, and two teenagers were enrolled in the eighth grade.

The socio-economic level of the subjects can best be characterized by their incomes and type of employment: only three board members earned an annual income of \$5000; the rest earned \$2000 or less per year. The jobs held by the subjects included service as plumbers, bus drivers, carpenters, maids, cooks, and farmers.

The nine board members were elected by area residents during community meetings and included representation of different social groups, age groups, occupations, and interests within the community. The major decision-making part of the project took place during weekly board meetings. At these meetings, the board emphasized identifying and solving community problems, such as arranging to have repairs made to the community center, organizing social and educational events, discovering and distributing social welfare resources to the community, finding and providing medical care, and administering a \$20,000 budget to fund these projects.

To maintain attendance, each member was paid \$4.00 for attending each of the 18 meetings scheduled during the study. Total cost for payment of subjects was \$648.00. Board meetings were generally held once or twice a week.

Setting

The study was conducted in a single-story, four-room frame school house built in the early 1900s in an isolated rural black community in

northwestern Florida, 15 miles east of Tallahassee. The meetings were held in the largest room, also used for other group activities of the project. A microphone was suspended from the ceiling in a central location to record the voices of members of the policy board. A Sony video camera, model AVC 3200 was positioned in the back of the room to record the meetings. Both were installed with the full consent of the board. Other equipment included: Sony V32 0.5 in. (1.3 cm) videotapes, Sony monitor CVM 920 U, and Sony tape video recorder model AV-3600. Figure 1 shows schematically where board members were located relative to the video recording equipment and the area where training was carried out.

Rationale

In extensive contact with the board for 1 yr before starting the study, it was noted that

discussion of one topic blended into another, board members talked about different problems simultaneously, the meetings lasted for long periods of time without clear decisions being reached, and when decisions were made, it was not clear who would carry them out.

Early unsystematic attempts to increase the effectiveness of the policy board consisted of assigning graduate students in community psychology to work with individual board members to help them plan and prepare for meetings. Several project staff members and university graduate students and faculty met with board members during meetings to serve as models for problem solving. An analysis of videotapes of several board meetings without these aides indicated little improvement in their skills.

Our analysis suggested three minimum, necessary, and sufficient steps for effective problem solving: (1) identifying and isolating the prob-

Fig. 1. A schematic floorplan of the meeting room where the experimenter carried out the training program and the board members held their meetings. The training program was held before the actual board meetings by the experimenter with one or two subjects. During the meetings, all board members were videotaped with the video camera located so as to have all board members on the screen at the same time.

lem under discussion, (2) stating and evaluating alternative solutions, and (3) selecting a solution and making explicit decisions for implementation (what would be done, by whom, when, and how). In practice, this involved training subjects to make key statements that led to problem-solving behavior. Thus, board members were taught to identify the cause of the problem, to label it with a key statement, and to use the key statement as a lead-in to a possible solution of the problem.

These steps constituted the minimum behaviors necessary to produce a complete problem-solving cycle. A decision was made to use a procedure that would lead as quickly as possible to increased problem solving in the meetings, leaving until later additional steps to enhance this effectiveness.

We chose to train the entire board, rather than only the chairman or a few members, because one objective was to facilitate active participation in problem-solving and decision-making by as many representatives of the community as possible. In addition, some absenteeism and a gradual turnover in board members was anticipated, and there was no way to determine in advance who would be the better problem solvers or emerging leaders.

Response Definitions

Problem-solving behaviors were divided into three major categories:

(1) *Problem identification.* The problem behavior was scored when any subject made the statement, "The problem is . . ." or an equivalent phrase containing the word "problem", such as, "The problem will be . . .", "The biggest problem is . . .", "The main problem is . . .", "The problem seems to be . . .", etc.

(2) *Solving problems.* The solution behavior was scored when subjects made the statement, "One solution is . . .", "Another solution is . . .", or an equivalent phrase containing the word "solution", such as, "There is another solution . . .", "The best way to solve this problem is by . . .", "Could you solve that by . . . ?".

(3) *Deciding on action to be taken.* The action behavior was scored only when subjects directed the following question(s) directly towards another board member: "What action are we going to take?" "Who will do it?" "Where will it be done?" "When will it be done?" and, "How will it be done?" No equivalent phrases were accepted for this behavior.

Observational System

Each board meeting was videotaped in its entirety (the board agreed to standardize the meetings to 1 hr) and viewed later by observers to collect data. The observers recorded only responses that specifically met the criterion specified above for each problem-solving behavior. The specific behavioral response statements (e.g., "The problem is . . .") were used as measures of problem-solving skills for two primary reasons. First, the use of these particular responses (or equivalents) could be easily and reliably measured. That is, it was not necessary for observers to make subjective judgments of the "intent" of the subjects' statements. Second, these statements would provide the subjects with clear, direct information during the meeting. Informal observations showed that these statements helped subjects to recognize types of information being communicated. Before using the behavioral statements, board members did not know whether others were stating a problem, suggesting a solution, or discussing irrelevant information.

The observational form, shown in Figure 2, was divided into separate agenda items that were further divided by having subjects' names contained within each topic in order to collect individual data. Board members decided upon agenda items one week in advance and the chairman wrote the topics on a chalk board placed in front of the group at the beginning of each meeting. Observers were able to follow the sequence of the meetings because the videotape of each meeting began with the camera focused on the agenda written on the chalk board. Having agenda items thus labelled, helped

six months by the chairman. The members agreed to have the meetings recorded and the camera was positioned so that all eight members plus the chairman were on-camera at the same time.

Pilot Training

A pilot training procedure preceded the training phase, during which the first author attempted to train the entire board as a group to make the first problem-solving statement, "The problem is . . .". This pilot training session preceded the regular board meeting and included a combination of written definitions and instructions on problem-solving behavior, a lecture on proper methods of solving problems, a demonstration of the correct behaviors, and verbal and written responses required by each board member. Following this session, the data show an increase of responding for only the chairman, even though the procedure was designed to increase responding of all subjects. Informal observations of a videotape of the training session showed several critical faults of the group instruction: (1) subjects were engaging in off-task behaviors (talking to each other, passing papers and pencils, reading) during the training session; (2) the training program was more appropriate for subjects with a stronger educational background (*i.e.*, the major emphasis on the lecture method and the requirement that subjects read many printed materials); (3) subjects were required to perform several different behaviors during the training session, such as, writing out problem-solving responses, comprehending the printed materials, and following the lecture. They also had extraneous information presented to them including, the various purposes of a training program, the responsibilities of board members, theories of problem solving, and so on. In short, the authors misjudged the appropriateness of a traditional university style instructional model for use in this community.

Since the procedure involving the whole board was ineffective, the following week the

During baseline, board meetings were conducted much as they had been for the previous

WADESBORO POLICY BOARD

Date of tape JAN 1 Page 1 Date JAN 1

Observer John Smith Reliability Obs. JANE WILLIAMS

Topic # 1 DONATIONS Topic # 2 Budget

1. Subject 1	P	D	W	WW				WW	W
2. Subject 2						P		P	
3. Subject 3			SS					W	
4. Subject 4			W			P			
5. Subject 5							S		
6. Subject 6									
7. Subject 7									
8. Subject 8									
9. Subject 9									

Fig. 2. Sample of observational form used to record the problem-solving statements made by the subjects during the meetings. The form was divided into separate agenda topics with the subjects listed with each one. The observers scored the behaviors as "P" for stating the problem, "S" for stating a solution, and "W" for initiating some action to be taken. The responses were recorded for individual subjects, during the particular topic and in the order in which the responses were made.

board chairman alone was trained during the 30 min preceding the regular board meeting, using an approach similar to that used with the group.

Training

Individual training on problem-solving behaviors occurred 30 min before board meetings. When the training session finished, the board member went to the meeting to incorporate the learned skills into the discussion of the different topics. The subjects' acquisition of problem-solving skills from the training program was measured in the board meetings. Board meetings were otherwise carried out in the normal fashion, *i.e.*, no contingencies were in effect during the meetings and the members followed their own agenda.

The research was initially designed to train two board members on each of the problem-solving skills; that is, two subjects were to be trained to identify the problem, two subjects trained to find solutions, and two subjects to decide on the action to be taken. In order for the group to follow the problem-solving sequence during the meetings, the chairman needed to have a knowledge of all three skills, and thus was to receive training in all three behaviors. However, the chairman was absent from three meetings and to correct for this unanticipated problem, the scheduling of subjects was altered. Thus, seven subjects in all were trained on various aspects of problem solving. The remaining two subjects received no training and served as controls. Individual subjects were aware that others were receiving training but not of the type of training and skills being learned.

The training of an individual board member was graduated from simple to difficult tasks and employed the use of fading, shaping, prompting, and differential social reinforcement of correct responding. Training for each skill began by teaching the member to say the key phrase (*e.g.*, "One solution is . . ."), then apply it to a simple problematic situation shown pictorially on a card, and finally to apply it to more and more complex situations described verbally to the sub-

ject. Modelling and role playing were used throughout the 30-min training session. Training of each of the three skills was carried out in a similar fashion. Table 1 shows the steps for a particular program in detail.

Follow-up

Follow-up consisted of recording the problem-solving behaviors of the subjects from a minimum of one week and up to two months after the training phase for each problem-solving skill had ended, under conditions similar to the baseline phase.

Professional Evaluation

To determine if training in problem solving was discriminable by an outside observer, a composite videotape of one baseline and one posttraining meeting was made. The first, middle, and last topic of the last meeting in baseline (meeting 5), and the last meeting following training (meeting 16) were randomly matched in pairs for comparison. Two university professors who taught courses in group problem solving and two community leaders active in local policy boards were shown the composite tape independently. They were asked to view two topic discussions (one from baseline and one from training) and to judge which showed greater problem-solving ability. The three pairs of topics were judged in this manner.

RESULTS

Reliability

The overall mean reliability on the occurrences of all problem-solving categories for the meetings was 79%. Reliability for the individual problem-solving skills were 88% for stating the problem, 85% for stating the solution, and 63% for stating the appropriate action.

Group Data

Baseline and pilot training. Baseline was carried out for five meetings, as shown in Figure 3. No statements involving the problem or solu-

Table 1
The Model for the Instructional Program
for the Board Training Sessions

Step I. The trainer introduced the subject to the problem-solving skill that was to be learned. The trainer showed the subject a card with the cue phrase printed on it, *e.g.*, "The problem is . . ."

- A. Trainer and subject read the cue phrase together.
- B. Subject read the cue phrase alone.
- C. After removing the cue card, subject repeated the cue phrase.
- D. Trainer reinforced the subject's correct response.

Step II. The subject practised making statements using the cue phrase. The trainer explained to the subject that the cue phrase was to be used during the board meeting and he (she) should practise it by making statements using the phrase during the training session.

- A. Subject was shown a picture of a problematic situation and asked to make a statement describing the picture using the cue phrase (*e.g.*, picture of girl in dentist's chair; dentist is examining her teeth. The subject's statement of the problem was "The problem is something wrong with the little girl's teeth."). Praise was given for correct responses.
- B. Subject had problematic situations read to him and made a statement using the cue phrase (*e.g.*, "There is a discussion of the Adult Education class. Fifteen adults are in the reading class. Everyone is to use a book to practice their reading, but there are only seven books. What is the problem?" The subject responded by saying, "The problem is the reading class does not have enough books."). Praise was given for correct responding.

Step III. The subject explained what was to be performed during the board meetings.

- A. Subject verbalized the response to be made during the board meeting (*e.g.*, the trainer asked the subject, "What are you going to say during the meeting?" The subject responded by saying, "The problem is . . ."). Praise was given for correct response.
 - B. Subject responded with a complete sentence telling what he was to perform during the meeting (*e.g.*, trainer asked the subject, "Tell me with a complete sentence what you will say during the meeting." Subject responded by saying, "I will state the problem for each topic during the meeting by saying, the problem is . . ."). Praise was given for correct response.
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tion were made during this time; one action statement was made. Just before meeting 6, the pilot training procedure involving the whole board on "stating the problem" was carried out. As shown in Figure 3, this had almost no effect. Before the seventh meeting, a similar procedure was used with the chairman only. As can be seen, the rate of problem statements rose to five (all made by the chairman).

Training. Before meetings 8 through 11, three board members (including the chairman) were trained to state the problem. As shown in Figure 3, problem statements quickly climbed to 15 in the next four meetings (an average

of 12). No increases in solution or action statements were seen. Using similar instructional methods, three board members (including the chairman) were trained to pick out and describe potential solutions to problems that had been stated. This training took place just before each of meetings 10 through 13. Again as shown in Figure 3, solution statements increased from zero to approximately 10 per meeting for the next four meetings; action statements increased slightly during this time. Before meetings 12 through 15, four board members (including the chairman) were trained to decide upon action that should be taken on the solutions to prob-

Fig. 3. Number of problem-solving statements made during the board meetings by all nine subjects. In the pilot condition, the training program utilized a lecture and discussion approach. This approach was attempted during one training session with all subjects and the next session with only the chairman. In the training condition, the programmed instructional model was utilized as the training procedure with the chairman and individual subjects. In the follow-up condition, the subjects no longer received training but were observed during the meetings. The arrow at meeting 17 indicates that during this meeting several outsiders and the first two authors attended the meeting and participated extensively. The participation of the subjects appeared to decrease greatly as a result.

lems that had been stated; action statements jumped immediately to 10 in the first meeting, and over the next four meetings rose to 15.

Follow-up. Once training was completed for a subject, he (she) received no prompting or feedback and they were considered to be in a follow-up phase for the remainder of the experiment. Figure 3 shows a slow decline in problem statements for six meetings following this training and a large jump during the last meeting that data were taken (one month after training had commenced). The number of solution statements made following training also dropped, but a trend toward even higher levels

than had been achieved during training was seen by the end of the follow-up period. Action statements remained fairly high in the follow-up phase, an average of about eight per meeting.

Individual Data

The data for individual subjects are shown in Figures 4 and 5. The data are broken down by number of statements in each of the three categories for each subject. Where a subject was given training on one of the skills, vertical dashed lines marked with a capital *T* show the meetings preceded by training.

Subject 1 (chairman). The chairman's baseline of problem, solution, and action statements was almost zero during baseline. In the meetings following training for each of the skills, his frequency of making the appropriate problem, solution, and action statements immediately increased.

Subject 2. This board member was trained on two skills, problem and action statements. Figure 4 shows that her frequency of making these statements increased immediately after the training. She showed some small increases in solution statements in which she did not receive any training.

Subject 3. This member was trained only on the problem and, as shown in Figure 4, training resulted in large increases from her zero rate of problem statements. Her performance fell when training was completed and in the follow-up she showed some small gains in solution and action statements.

Subject 4. This member was trained only on the solution skill and, as shown in Figure 4, his rate of solution statements increased only after the training; his rate did not maintain throughout the follow-up period.

Subject 5. This member was also trained to find solutions to problems and showed a small increase in such statements during and shortly after training. Her rate also fell to zero during the subsequent follow-up phase.

Subject 6. Training on action statements was given to this subject and he showed a small in-

Fig. 4. The number of statements made during the meeting by Subjects 1 to 5 across baseline (BL), pilot (P), training (T), and follow-up (F-up).

crease in such statements. This repertoire held up for three meetings in the follow-up but did not maintain.

Subject 7. Although given no training on solution statements, this subject showed a high frequency of such statements when Subjects 1, 4, and 5 received their training. Her rate was

lower for three meetings and then again rose to a high level at the end of follow-up. This member was trained on action statements and showed an increase during training, but the repertoire did not maintain.

Subjects 8 and 9. These subjects were not trained on any of the skills and, as shown in

Fig. 5. The number of statements made during the meetings by Subjects 6 to 9 across baseline (BL), pilot (P), training (T), and follow-up (F-up).

Figure 5, their rates remained at zero for all skills for all sessions.

Professional Evaluation

The four judges agreed unanimously that two of the three segments that they viewed showed greater problem-solving ability following training as compared to baseline; they rated one baseline segment as better than its matched training segment.

DISCUSSION

These data suggest that the individual training program, based on a behavioral model was effective in teaching low-income individuals problem-solving skills usable in community board meetings. The multiple-baseline across skills and subjects design showed that problem-solving behavior occurred (with only three exceptions) following training on that particular skill; control subjects who were given no train-

ing on any of the skills showed no increases in the behaviors. Three subjects (2, 3, and 7) showed some increases in skills they were not specifically trained in, and this poses a problem for the analysis. In all cases, these increases in responding were correlated with increases shown by other subjects being trained on the skill. Informal observation of the tapes suggests that these subjects were actively imitating the behavior of trained board members (*e.g.*, using the same phrases to talk about a problem). It would be impossible to eliminate such effects without making substantial changes in the board meetings themselves.

This study represents our first attempt to modify complex group problem-solving in a natural unstructured setting. The particular skills taught may appear unimportant or trivial; however, as described in the introduction, a thorough review of relevant research revealed no programs, with an ongoing evaluation component, that approximate the setting and behavior dealt with here. Thus, although the research design was not complicated, the methodological contribution is unique.

"Real world" problem solving does not always consist of the three simple steps of stating the problem, finding solutions, and deciding on action to be taken. Other authors consider more steps to be involved. Perlman and Gurin (1972) for example, argued that problem solving consists of: (1) defining the problem, (2) building a structure, (3) examining alternatives, (4) taking action, and (5) evaluating outcomes. They presented no data showing how one teaches these skills and did not suggest how one could evaluate their use. There is a theoretical model for social problem solving; the present study presents an experimental approach to the same problem.

The present experiment has much in common with a recent analysis of conflict-resolution behavior between adolescents and their parents (Kifer, *et al.*, 1974). In that study, the components of successful conflict resolution were determined and then taught in individual role-

playing situations to parent-child pairs. A multiple-baseline design across subjects showed that training generated negotiation skills. Data taken in the subjects' homes revealed good generalization to actual conflicts. Thus, while completely different subject populations were dealt with, and considerably different target behaviors taught, the findings were similar to those of the present study.

The present research represents the formative stages in the development of a new field of application, namely behavioral community psychology. The present results are tentative in several respects. First, although the training program was effective in teaching the skill, those skills were not maintained at high levels in all subjects.

This was due, in part, to subjects drifting away from the particular terms learned in training toward words and phrases with which they were more comfortable. Nonetheless, the maintenance of problem-solving skills over time may present major problems. A preliminary analysis suggests several alternatives: (1) the actual behaviors taught could be different *i.e.*, perhaps the behaviors taught did not maintain because they were not followed immediately by natural reinforcers; (2) the training itself needs to be more intensive *i.e.*, training in the present study took place in half-hour sessions on two separate days. Perhaps 5 or 6 hr of training over a two-day period would be more effective; (3) monitoring during the meetings and extrinsic reinforcers could be provided for those using problem-solving skills during the meeting. This last proposal is based on the notion that problem-solving behavior is too far removed in time for the natural consequences to maintain by itself, at least at first.

The results are tentative in another respect. No information is available on whether the board more successfully accomplished its objectives as a result of the training. A preliminary and informal assessment of this area suggests that measurement will be difficult. The board has many goals and objectives, some short and

others long range (e.g., having a window repaired in the center *versus* obtaining a grant for a farm cooperative), some involve an observable product (e.g., was a piece of equipment actually purchased, or was an item repaired, etc.), while others are more "process" oriented (e.g., a person is to be contacted, a meeting held, or a form sent in) where the actual product of the behavior may be far removed in time. In addition, the specified action can be carried out but the result may still be negative (e.g., the visiting nurse is contacted about a visit but does not show up). In short, there are many complexities involved in assessing the long-range result of training in problem solving. Research is underway to address this issue.

A behavioral approach to community psychology may represent a useful departure from the traditional mental health orientation of that field. In this poor, black community, for example, some very real behavioral problems exist, such as failure of members to participate in preventive health care programs, or adult education programs. Other problems involve high unemployment and school drop-out rates, and failure to receive the dental, medical, and social services to which they are entitled. We anticipate that applied behavior analysis will provide new and successful remedies to these long-standing community problems.

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