What's the Function of a Misnomer?

Ron Van Houten
Mount Saint Vincent University

Dr. Starin has made an important point about a politically touchy issue. That point simply stated is that behavior analysts have a responsibility to use behavioral terms in a precise and consistent manner. Dr. Starin has made this point well and I do not feel that I can improve upon the content of his paper. However, there is a related issue that is not addressed in Dr. Starin's paper that should be addressed if the field is to minimize such problems in the future. The issue focuses on why some behavior analysts who acknowledge functional definitions of punishment and negative reinforcement, use the terms "aversive" and "non-aversive" nonfunctionally in their professional activities. The answer to this question can only be addressed by an examination of the environment in which these behavior analysts work.

Behavior analysts do not work in a vacuum. The behavior of professionals working in applied settings is influenced by contingencies of reinforcement and punishment in the same way as the people they serve. Therefore it should come as no surprise that the behavior of professionals can come under stimulus control of their audiences. The power of these types of contingencies is best illustrated by the extreme example in Soviet genetics in the 1930's and 1940's during the period when Lysenko's Lamarckian views were elevated by political leaders (Huxley, 1940). An entire branch of science, neo-Mendelism, was suppressed on ideological grounds, under political pressure. Not only were Soviet geneticists who did not hold the politically correct view not funded, some were actually sent to Siberia for mentioning genes or chromosomes in their work.

Contingencies applied by pressure groups contribute to sloppy terminology. Such groups may attempt to influence access to clients, restrict the use of procedures through legislation, or attempt to

influence funding policy. Organizations with a political agenda can also make use of social reinforcement and punishment in order to influence the behavior of professionals. These groups can provide special attention and recognition at meetings and other special events to those professionals who give lip service to their views. They can provide those who hold the "correct" view with elevated status within their organization. They may also adopt policies that would prevent the publication of treatment studies that involve the use of "incorrect methods" (e.g., punishment) in their journals. This is certainly an old issue for behavior analysts. One of the reasons for establishing the *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* was the difficulty behavior analysts had in publishing in other journals.

Fear of losing access to clients that one knows he or she can help, access to special funding, and the possibility of earning large consulting fees can influence the behavior of professionals who belong to a discipline. There are two ways that such contingencies seem to influence people. Some people will respond by changing the terminology somewhat to increase its acceptability to a particular swing in public mood. Punishment procedures might be referred to as crisis intervention, or techniques used to defuse a dangerous situation. Some might even adopt the rationale "that it is not a punishment procedure if I did not intend it to be one." This type of behavior can function as an escape response or as a means of acquiring more reinforcement. Others who may be more opportunistic, may vilify those who use aversive procedures in order to further enhance their status within the groups they are attempting to influence. In so doing they may influence these groups to take an even more radical stance than they had to date.

The contingencies that tend to keep us "honest" are the recognition of others in

our field and the self correcting way in which science is conducted that typically leads to recognition for those who's system generates the best data and works the best. These contingencies can be relatively slow acting. Of course many might make their fortune or fame along the way, but in the long run, the people with the most effective system will prevail. Papers such as the one written by Stephen Starin are part of this checks and balance system

that helps to keep scientific inquiries on track. Perhaps it should be considered that the rights of clients are best protected when we are honest in our description of what we do and attempt to be precise in our use of terminology.

REFERENCES

Huxley, J. (1940). *Heredity east and west*. New York: Henry Schuman.