Behavior Mod: A Short Reply to the Critics

Paul J. Champagne
Michigan Technological University

Curt Tausky
University of Massachusetts

Recently, critics of behavior modification applied to practical problems in organizations have become increasingly vocal. Locke (1977), for example, has attempted to critically analyze such programs by examining four behavior mod techniques commonly used in organizations. From his perspective they are neither behavioristic nor new. The behavioristic model, he states, is not a valid or useful guide for the manager who desires to improve employee skills and motivation.

Such criticisms are typical of the objections being raised to the use of behavior mod in business organizations. Yet a closer examination reveals some serious gaps in the opponents' arguments. This paper will attempt to point out some of the more blatant ones and, at the same time, suggest that behavior mod can indeed be a useful tool for managers if used judiciously.

According to *Business Week* ("Productivity Gains From a Pat on the Back," 1978), more and more major companies have begun to use behavior modification in an attempt to deal with problems of productivity, absenteeism and turnover. Included in the list are 3M, B. F. Goodrich, Frito Lay, Weyerhaeuser, Addressograph-Multigraph and Warner-Lambert. In addition, positive evidence is becoming increasingly available, as the recent works of Luthans and Kreitner (1975), Hamner and Organ (1978), Babb and Kopp (1978), and Miller (1978) would indicate. Despite this, critics continue to downplay the application of the technique in work organizations. They argue that it is manipulative, denies freedom and individuality, and lacks the capacity to explain human action.¹ The debate has now reached the stage that even the popular media has become involved. A recent newspaper

editorial by a nationally syndicated columnist (Von Hoffman, 1978), contends that the coming of behavior mod is "bad news for eccentrics, independent thinkers, civil libertarians and those who fear the conjunction of unaccountable corporate power and technological know-how."

A Reinterpretation and Reconsideration

One of the primary misconceptions about behavior mod is that it is based on a simplistic stimulus-response model of human action. Locke (1977), for example, proposes that "behaviorism asserts that human behavior can be understood without reference to mind or actions of consciousness," (p. 543), implying that responses can be modified automatically, independent of values, beliefs or mental processes. In a recent book, Viola (1977) refers to B. F. Skinner as the most extreme and best known stimulus-response proponent.

Certainly it is true that behavior mod had its beginnings in the stimulus-response theory of Watson, which did indeed ignore the existence of cognitive processes. But that was over fifty years ago. Today most proponents of the technique, including Skinner, view this as a strategic, if understandable, error. Most of Watson's contemporaries believed they were studying mental processes in a complex world of consciousness. But he, being greatly impressed by new evidence of what an organism could learn, rejected this and went on to make some rather extreme claims, which even he later admitted were exaggerated (Skinner, 1974). Unfortunately, behavior mod has ever since suffered from these early excesses.

The model of man used by behavior mod is not S-R but rather Skinner's operant conditioning approach. Even a cursory examination reveals a world of difference between this and its early predecessor. Clearly it is much more complex, implying a variety of complex cognitive processes. For a person to respond to environmental feedback and repeat or modify that behavior in the future, he must be able to perceive, interpret, remember and make a variety of judgments about the cues received from the world around him. In

Requests for reprints should be sent to Paul J. Champagne, School of Business and Engineering Administration, Michigan Technological University, Houghton, MI 49931.

¹The common criticism of behavior mod are widely cited and have been dealt with by others. Interested parties should examine the work of Luthans and Kreitner (1975) or Hamner and Organ (1978).

Behavior Mod: A Short Reply to the Critics

no sense are these reflexes. While behavior mod does rest on determinism, this does not imply any type of automatic conditioning process. The world of B. F. Skinner is not that of *Nineteen Eighty Four* or "Clockwork Orange." To say that behavior is a function of its consequences does not mean that people do not think, introspect or control the actions of their minds and bodies; that they are totally devoid of volition.

The point, however, is this: from where do these feelings and states of mind come? Do they materialize out of thin air, the product of some mysterious process? Or are they the result of our daily world of experience? Behaviorism suggests the latter.

Toward a More Balanced Perspective

Early experimentation with operant conditioning relied mainly on lower organisms and there are many who continue to examine behavior using laboratory rats and pigeons. But the technique has also been used successfully as therapy in hospitals, prisons and schools and has even been applied to "normal achieving" school children (Hamblin, 1971). The literature contains examples too numerous to mention and the results are rather uniformly impressive.

During the past ten or fifteen years, more and more business firms have turned to behavior mod. Beginning with the widely cited case of Emery Air Freight, the results have again been quite positive. The better known programs include Michigan Bell Telephone, Connecticut General Insurance General Electric, Standard Oil of Ohio, Weyerhaeuser, ACDE Electronics, as well as others. For a more complete discussion, the reader should consult Hamner and Hamner (1976). In view of all the positive evidence, it is difficult to understand how critics can continue to deny the validity and utility of the technique.

Given the many human resource problems facing work organizations, what techniques, other than behavior mod, might managers use? Theorists, such as Maslow, Herzberg and Likert, have consistently argued that problems of motivation could be dealt with more effectively using a variety of more "humanistic" or participative approaches, such as job enrichment, MBO or possible Transactional Analysis. The question, however, is whether a fundamental difference exists between these techniques and the explicit reinforcement approach of behavior mod. A recent paper by Parke and Tausky (1975) argues that successful job enrichment programs actually

rely on several, though often unstated, contingencies of reinforcement. Examining the experiences of AT&T, Motorola, General Foods, Corning Glass, Maytag and Texas Instruments, they suggest that a better explanation for success can be found by focusing on the tangible consequences of employee behavior, especially feedback, accountability for error, and the other rewards and penalties embedded in the organizational structure. "Who gets what for what" is, in the final analysis, the basis for managerial influence on behavior.

The same may be said for MBO and TA. MBO, for example, involves explicit feedback, employee accountability for meeting individual work goals, and rewards for performing up to expected levels. In a recent paper Cushnie (1975) examines TA's relationship to motivation. People, he suggests, are strongly motivated to seek recognition; the hunger for which can be satisfied by administering positive or negative "strokes." The manager who is aware of this will find ways to provide positive strokes in recognizing productive performance of both routine and exceptional tasks.

As these examples illustrate, it is quite possible, and instructive, to reinterpret programs based on non-reinforcement theories in the light of reinforcement ideas. One important reason for doing this is that it forces recognition of the fact that what one singles out as important casual variables is strongly influenced by the investigator's point of view. So in MBO, for instance, the investigator inclined toward human relations will see in a successful program the utility of participation in goal-setting. Or in job enrichment, the observer may be struck by the gains achieved through more complex tasks. In both cases, the reinforcement theorist will call attention to such features of these programs as increased accountability and its relation to reward opportunities.

The unfortunate aspect of this situation is that casual variables are rarely available in neat packages for our inspection. The theorist of a particular persuasion is tempted to select from the host of variables present in a situation those that "make sense" in light of his/her orientation. So too with reinforcement. Having candidly said this, we nevertheless urge that the lesson to be drawn from a close look at organizational programs and practices is that contingencies of reinforcement are indeed pervasive and potent influences on behavior. Denying their reality and utility can only

distract us from a better understanding of how social organizations work.

Models of Human Nature and Control Processes

To get a firmer grip on what we are suggesting, it is useful to ask "What are the possible means by which behavior can be influenced?" As it turns out, the historical answers reappear in current theories of motivation.

Consider, first, various assumptions about human nature. These tend to fall into three categories: (1) people must be induced—through a system of positive rewards and negative sanctions—to pursue their wants in ways which are socially productive rather than damaging to others; (2) people are similar to a blank slate, learning norms and values from the surrounding social environment, and are thus guided by socially acquired values and norms to engage in acceptable behavior; (3) humans are inherently empathetic, but have been corrupted by social institutions which stifle their natural inclinations, hence, reduction or minimization of the coercive processes in our contrived institutional patterns would liberate people to "be themselves" and thus activate the previously dormant inclinations toward social cooperation. The social philosophers associated with these three contrasting perspectives are, of course, respectively, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Current theories of employee motivation incorporate one or the other of the above viewpoints. Briefly, human relations/human resources theory is organized around model three, but with a twist. It is not empathy which receives attention, but the "natural" human propensity to self-actualize in the work place. A genetic predisposition is invoked, and the result is the admonition to enrich jobs because the enriched job serves to elicit the desired behavior. Control is viewed as in the person; the desired behavior is triggered either by the challenge and complexity of the work task (Maslow, 1965; McGregor, 1957) or by open, participative leadership (Likert, 1967).

Model one and to some degree, model two provide the foundation for behavior modification. Essentially, they emphasize the linkage between reinforcers (rewards, inducements) and social learning. In this perspective the individual is viewed as having experienced "socialization." By being embeded in a social environment, people learn what those around them value.

Initially, the environment intrudes upon the child in the areas of toilet training and speech. Later, the maturing child is exposed to definition of proper appearance, manners, educational accomplishments, political beliefs, and so forth. The environment is thus never neutral, but crammed with the values of those people surrounding the individual. But how does the process work? Simply involving the environment does not adequately inform us as to the process by which external values come to influence actual behavior. The answer to which behavior modification points is reinforcement. The people who comprise an environment reward (with praise, affection, or more tangible, material things such as toys, allowance, use of the family car) those behaviors which match their valuations of appropriate conduct while discouraging inappropriate conduct with subtle hints (facial expressions, for instance) and overt reminders. In this manner people learn how to respond to an environment in which certain behaviors and attitudes are valued. The behavior modification perspective thus integrates concern with values and reinforcement.

Now let us see how this applies to organizations. First, we note that people enter organizational jobs with a set of values learned in prior situations. They may value, for example, income derived from work, job security, pay raises, promotions, prestigious job titles, interesting work, and so on. In short, people desire to receive particular valued results through their jobs.

Second, we note that the values which people carry into an organization are linked to its reinforcement system. Simplifying a model developed by Lawler (1973), we can put it this way: people value some outcomes over others, and they have in mind what outcomes will follow from their job behavior. For instance, if being more productive leads to higher pay or promotion, then those who want higher pay and promotion will be inclined to be more productive. Thus, when people desire the rewards an organization has the ability to distribute, particular job behaviors can be required in order to receive those rewards. This, of course, is the crux of organizational control systems. Reinforcers are bestowed by those who hold them, such as managers, in the form of subordinates' pay raises or promotions or demotions.

Further, the reinforcement model incorporates the argument that outcomes should not be

Behavior Mod: A Short Reply to the Critics

identical. If pay, for instance, is the same regardless of performance, the average level of effort would decrease among the work force; or if law students were granted the right to practice law, regardless of performance on the bar exam, the amount of time spent on study would decrease among law students. The reinforcement model thus points to the granting and withholding of valued rewards as unavoidable in occasional appropriate behavior.

One final comment. Those of us who teach can be quite sure that nearly all the students will take our courses' final exams. Indeed, we can predict this with nearly 100 percent accuracy. Now, how can we most plausibly account for such remarkable student behavior? If a social science model can predict with such high accuracy, it seems reasonable to believe that the model must be taken very seriously. The test-taking illustration may, of course, be viewed as trivial by some. But from the point of view of the reinforcement model, behavior in organizations is understood as essentially motivated by similar processes of reward contingencies. It may be a disturbing perspective to some, but it does seem to provide a more powerful explanation of behavior than is obtainable with other frameworks.

Conclusion

To speak of techniques of social control has a nasty sound. It is certainly more gratifying to talk about internalized values or innate personality characteristics producing the motivation to work. These, however, will not sufficiently inform us about the operation of business organizations or how they might realistically be improved. Reinforcement theory, as Williams (1978) points out, simply states that it is better to overtly specify the consequences of organizationally desirable behavior than to leave them clouded. What could be more "humanistic" or useful than deliberately making explicit the inevitable processes of encouraging (rewarding) desired behavior so that employees can make informed choices between clearly defined alternatives?

If the work of the contingency theorists, beginning with Woodward (1965) is valid, then no single approach to motivation will apply in all situations. Were behavior mod to be applied indiscriminately, or promoted as the new panacea, it would surely fail, as have many job enrichment and MBO programs. But with the appropriate circumstances (when the desired behavior can be clearly specified), it may be an extremely useful

tool and can be much more than just the latest fad or gimmick. Those who reject it on purely philosophical grounds may deny managers a potentially valuable and workable solution to a variety of pervasive problems.

References

- Argyris, Chris. "Personality and Organization Theory Revisited," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (June, 1973), pp. 141-167.
- Babb, Harold W. and Daniel G. Kopp. "Application of Behavior Modification in Organizations: A Review and Critique," *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (April, 1978), pp. 281-292.
- Cushnic, William D. "A Manager's Introduction to Transactional Analysis," *Advanced Management Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (Autumn, 1975), pp. 37-45.
- Hamblin, Robert L., Buckholdt, D., Ferritor, D., Kozloff, M., Blackwell, L. *The Humanization Process* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1971).
- Hamner, W. Clay and Ellen P. Hamner. "Behavior Modification on the Bottom Line," *Organizational Dynamics* (Spring, 1976), pp. 2-21.
- Hamner, W. Clay and Denis Organ. *Organizational Behavior: An Applied Psychological Approach* (Dollax, Business Publications, 1978).
- Lawler, Edwin E. III. *Motivation in Work Organizations* (Belmont, Calif., Brooks/Cole, 1973).
- Likert, Rensis. *The Human Organization*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).
- Locke, Edwin A. "The Myths of Behavior Mod in Organizations," *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 2, No. 4, (October, 1977), pp. 543-553.
- Luthans, Fred and Robert Kreitner. *Organizational Behavior Modifications* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1975).
- Maslow, Abraham H. *Eupsychian Management* (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, 1965).
- McGregor, Douglas. "The Human Side of Enterprises," *The Management Review* Vol. 46 (November, 1957), pp. 22-28, 88-92.
- Miller, Lawrence M. *Behavior Management* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978).
- Parke, E. Lauck and Curt Tausky. "The Mythology of Job Enrichment: Self-Actualization Revisited," *Personnel*, Vol. 52, (Sept.-Oct., 1975), pp. 12-21.
- "Productive gains from a pat on the back," *Business Week* January 23, 1978, pp. 56-62.
- Skinner, B. F. *About Behaviorism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974).
- Viola, Richard H. *Organizations in a Changing Society* (Philadelphia, W. B. Saunders Co., 1977).
- Von Hoffman, Nicholas. "Behavior Modification: How Not To Motivate Workers," *The Daily Mining Gazette* (Houghton, Michigan: February 6, 1978).
- Vroom, Victor H. *Work and Motivation* (New York: Wiley, 1964).
- Williams, J. Clifton. *Human Behavior in Organizations* (Cincinnati: Southwestern Publishing Co., 1978).
- Woodward, Joan. *Industrial Organization: Theory and Practice* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).