Book Review

Coercion: Rapids in the Stream of Family Performance: A Review of Patterson's *Coercive Family Process*

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Coercive Family Process summarizes a vast array of data on family interactions and, most importantly, Gerald Patterson's interpretation of these data. Readers of this book must be prepared for a challenging experience in which ideas unfamiliar to many developmental and clinical practitioners are presented in every chapter. This is not a book for the novice. I would say that potential readers ought to have a basic grasp of learning theories and social developmental and psychopathology data. With these prerequisites, Patterson's book can be a major educational experience. If the reader is also willing to relinquish mechanistic behavioral or psychodynamic biases, such an experience is guaranteed. The data base for *Coercive Family Process* is largely available elsewhere so that well informed readers will have no problem in this respect. Because Patterson's interpretation of these data, however, is what makes this book unique, some readers may experience rough waters if they approach it with the aforementioned mind sets. The Patterson interpretation is bound to upset Watsonian behaviorists as well as Freudian psychodynamicists, but will sit well with those who are inclined toward a liberal interpretation of Kantor's interbehavioral psychology (see Morris, 1982).

There can be little doubt after reading this book that Patterson is a behaviorist. But, if one were then to expect a view of family interaction in terms of reinforcers and discriminative and conditional stimuli, that reader would be sadly disappointed. Instead, one will find a picture

of molecular events such as a child's "yelling" mixed in with molar events such as "mother attributions." The mixture does not lend itself to cognitive behaviorism any more than it does to some sort of hard-nosed psychodynamic position. Patterson consistently argues for a conceptual model in which these events are to be understood as covarying units of a natural system. Some of the covariations are understandable in the sense that they have been documented in repeated empirical tests (e.g., mother's aversive response will increase the likelihood of child's obnoxious behavior), but most are speculative in nature or tentative in their empirical support. Patterson is quite willing to acknowledge "fits" between findings and theory, whether that fit represents Skinnerian or Adlerian positions. The thrust of his arguments, however, leaves all theoretical positions wanting and points us instead toward a more inductive approach to understanding normal and troubled families. What follows is my effort to describe Patterson's arguments, including the implications of these arguments for an interbehavioral model of family functioning.

LEARNING VS. PERFORMANCE

Early in the book, Patterson cites the utility of reinforcement concepts in understanding and helping troubled families. But, at the same time, he outlines problems with the concepts when one's work arena is a natural field setting rather than a laboratory. In line with Roger Barker's (1963) impressions on the stream-like quality of natural settings, families on the hoof initially baffled the laboratory-trained Patterson—"For example, in one of our first home visits . . . [the child] simply wheeled about, dashed

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out the back door and climbed a tree. My assistant and I stood nonplused until the mother gave us a cup of coffee and later sent us home" (p. 3). As Patterson and his colleagues struggled with observation methodology in the 1960's, they were struck by the limited utility of laboratory-derived methods and concepts in making sense out of natural phenomena. Ultimately, they gave up the laboratory-favored concept of response rate in favor of the conditional probability as a more useful index of social interaction.

Patterson has also had a bone to pick with learning theorists whose concepts of causality again came from the laboratory. One of the strongest points in this book, appearing throughout the text, has to do with our inadequate understanding of human performance. In reference to learning theorists, Patterson notes, "... the bulk of their writings deal with the analysis of variables thought to determine learning. As a result, most of the variables concerning 'laws' of human behavior related to learning; few, if any, are concerned with changes in performance per se" (p. 6). The crux of this argument seems to bear on the utility of knowing the conditions under which an individual acquires a pattern of behavior. So what? Although we have now achieved a sort of understanding about the developmental causes of a child's nagging, for example, that knowledge tells us little about why the performance of this behavior fluctuates over time and settings. Unless we also discover the laws of performance, we cannot comprehend these fluctuations and we are powerless to do anything about them if clinical change is deemed necessary. The problem-behaviors of children might well develop in line with well known principles of learning, but somewhat different principles could be involved in the *maintenance* of such behaviors. Patterson's role as a pragmatist as well as that of scholar is evident throughout the book.

If causal factors in family performance differ from their historical causes, what is the substance of this difference? Patterson devotes a good many pages to this substance, presenting an empirically

based picture on the complex nature of social settings. Laboratory-based learning concepts, primarily those comprising reinforcement principles, are found to be important determinants of performance. But these determinants are also shown to be largely *indirect* in the prediction of family members' behaviors. Although the consequences of behavior will influence the future performance of that behavior, that influence is tempered by a host of setting and organismic factors that can create paradoxical outcomes over settings and time. Thus, a mother's scolding can function as an aversive stimulus for some of a boy's behaviors, but also as a positive reinforcer for some of his other actions. Performance theory should ultimately yield new principles depicting the operating functions of physiological arousal, stimulus contingencies, attributions, historical experiences, and environmental stressors.

Patterson is perhaps most impressed by the temporally immediate antecedents of behavior as the best single predictor of performance. These antecedent events can be stimuli provided by another person (e.g., mother command) or that individual's own responses (e.g., child nag leads to child whine). The schema $p(R_j/A_i)$ is used throughout the text as a performance index: The probability of some relevant response (R_j), given the occurrence of some antecedent event (A_i). The data reviewed over several chapters show that consequences of R_j will affect the controlling power of A_i , but so will the setting and organismic factors described earlier. The beauty of Patterson's performance theory, as he has thus far sketched it, has as much to do with clinical application as with scholarly understanding of why families behave as they do. As the last chapter suggests and sometimes documents, clinicians who follow the performance strategy in assessment and intervention can become potent helping agents.

OF UNITS AND UMIACS

Performance theory is intended to promote our understanding of aggression,

particularly the aggressive behaviors of antisocial children. Patterson dwells extensively on various formulations of aggression before concluding that a *general* definition is not very probable. Rather, he argues, a more reasonable and useful stance could be achieved by formulating definitions for specific cases. One such case in point has to do with family interchanges in which the events involved are both *aversive* and *contingent*. A fairly circumscribed summary term for such exchanges is "pain control," used by Patterson to describe particular effects of these exchanges on the recipient ("victim") as well as the dispenser ("aggressor"). "Pain control" seems fairly understandable as an operant. But Patterson also emphasizes that these exchanges are embedded within a context of other family exchanges, as well as setting and organismic factors. The term *coercion* is a more molar summary term for the process describing the hows and whys of contingent and aversive family events. Coercion has an interbehavioral meaning that encompasses the full spectrum of organismic, family, and community factors impinging on these aversive contingencies. In the course of several chapters, notably chapters 4 through 8, Patterson creates the image of a funnel through which Performance Theory describes the functioning of a well-adjusted child or a monster. Coercion is the funnelling of macro-events, such as parent dysphoric mood and marital strife, on their way to the crucial parent-child exchanges of micro-events such as yelling and crying. There is a long tube at the end of that funnel, describing the exacerbation or calming of these aversive exchanges—dependent, of course, on the funnel context.

Patterson's discussion of coercive process gives the reader full appreciation of the stream-like quality of family and community systems. His extensive discussion of empirical findings and various ideas from other investigators is apt to make readers impatient. The book will not yield a complete picture of Performance Theory, because as Patterson repeatedly says (in my words), "I don't

know what the complete picture looks like." Although of small consequence to some readers, there is great wisdom in that theory-building strategy. Patterson is largely inductive in his reasoning about theory construction. Much of what one sees in this book has to do with principles of theory construction, or how we make sense out of the ever-flowing stream of observed family interactions. Patterson emphasizes an important first step: One must come up with a *unit* definition permitting an observer to segment the stream of family performance. How you come up with that definition is a crucial part of Patterson's strategy. You can guess, based on prior theories or the demands of your teachers, or you *can* observe and wait and agonize and analyze and observe again and agonize again—the painful and boring process of induction.

Patterson's performance index $p(R_j/A_i)$ is one such unit definition derived through induction. That index unitizes the stream of family events into molecular "windows" of dyadic exchange. But, as Patterson and others have discovered, these units are tied functionally to other, larger units in the stream and, thus, one must also derive indices of these molar segments. Therefore, Parent Daily Reports (PRD) are used to depict global segments of child behavior, such as stealing; Lubin Mood questionnaires sample parent summary judgments of their feelings; and Crisis Reports by parents yield global accounts of aversive encounters within and outside the family. These molar units of family performance came about through the same laborious process of induction that produced the molecular performance index. Given the use of these various unit measures, one could actually produce an empirical picture of the family system by correlational analyses of unit fluctuation. In essence, one obtains a "structural" product depicting a network of functional pathways comprising a family. Patterson presents some remarkably consistent correlations between and among these units, some so dependable (via replication) as to constitute "traits" of the system. Although he cautions the reader to consider the correlational na-

ture of this product, he is also willing to put money on some of the trait-like covariations. "Irritability" is one such system trait, referring to tendencies by mothers and their children to produce, in stylistic fashion, four social phenomena: crossover, counterattack, punishment acceleration, and continuance. Specifically, members of distressed or troubled families, compared to nonproblem control families, are more likely to (a) initiate aversive responding (crossover), (b) respond "in kind" to an aversive response (counterattack), (c) extend the chain of matching aversive responses (punishment acceleration), and (d) persevere in aversive responding regardless of what the other member does (continuance). "Irritability," as a fundamental unit of family performance, has achieved empirical grounding almost as sound as its more molecular cousin ($p(R_j/A_i)$).

Although Patterson is obviously encouraged by his discoveries of stable units comprising family systems, again and again he emphasizes the flexibility or ever-changing nature of unit interrelationships. Thus, the obtained covariations have been shown to fluctuate across time and moment-to-moment shifts in family settings (e.g., mealtimes vs. recreation periods). As Patterson concludes: "The structure of human interaction is in many ways analogous to that of the Eskimo umiak. This ocean-going craft is beautiful in design and function. It *shifts* and *adjusts* itself as it moves over waves but, at the same time, retains its essential design and purpose" (p. 177).

SOME PRAGMATIC CONCLUSIONS ABOUT PUNISHMENT AND LOVE

Chapters 10 through 13 move the focus of this text into progressively more practical issues. When a child develops antisocial behavior patterns, it seems clear that his or her parents are also deficient in the performance of basic parenting skills. Mothers, in particular, because of their primary parenting responsibilities, are most likely to demonstrate these skill deficiencies. They are not apt to monitor their troubled children accurately, they

issue ambiguous instructions and rules, and they are apt to be inconsistent in the use of approval and disapproval. Under these "teaching conditions," antisocial children seem to sharpen their coercive interpersonal styles along certain developmental pathways. Some of them, called "Social Aggressors," are overtly aggressive in style—they hit, threaten, fight, and defy others to respond in like fashion. Others, called "stealers," are more covert in the sense that their coercive actions are hidden from public view—they steal, are truant from school, do not complete assigned work, and may destroy property. Patterson has documented the behavioral differences between these two groups of antisocial children and offers tentative data reflecting progressive steps in family processes leading to these differences. Although both sorts of antisocial children refuse to comply with parental instructions and rules, their parents differ in the types of disobedience they will tolerate. These parental "tolerances" are instructive in reference to the earlier mentioned parenting skill deficiencies: "The parents of a stealer may tolerate rule violations concerning vandalism and stealing, but will not tolerate noncompliance to a direct request. . . . On the other hand, parents of Social Aggressors will tolerate noncompliance to direct commands, but will not tolerate violations of rules about property damage or theft" (p. 241).

Differential parent tolerances are undoubtedly complex functions of other parent problems (e.g., child monitoring and parent mood), as well as other family system problems (e.g., marital strife). But, the interesting bottom line practical issue has to do with the question of what would happen if these parents did not tolerate such acts of noncompliance. In essence, the issue translates into parent use of punishment of noncompliance and/or reinforcement of compliance. I am quite impressed with Patterson's consideration of this issue. Normal families are characterized by an abundance of reciprocal positive exchanges—far more than occur in troubled families. This contrast would lead one to think that remediating the

skill deficits of troubled parents should emphasize positive exchanges. Although there is a good deal of truth to this conclusion, an even stronger case can be made for teaching these parents the skillful use of aversive events. Such a case flies in the face of public disdain of punishment in childrearing, particularly in families whose use of aversive events is excessive (i.e., families of antisocial children). Patterson's courage is to be commended as well as his very thorough documentation of the punishment issue: "During the last five years of treating samples of extremely difficult chronic delinquent and abused children, we have become convinced that training parents to use a *nonviolent* form of punishment is a *necessary component of successful intervention*" (p. 136). The evidence cited by Patterson is a clear endorsement of a position some of us have long believed, but shuddered to voice. Take a practical example. When a seven-year-old Social Aggressor escalates from nag to whine to hit, and his mother matches these aversives with those of her own, many observers would be horrified to hear that

this mother will now be taught to use punishment. Yet we know from the empirical literature that "love is not enough" to remediate this chronic problem. Unless this mother curbs her youngster's escalation, prognosis for change in her child's behavior is poor. Unfortunately, such curbing is not likely to be achieved through positive means alone.

In summation, Gerald Patterson has produced a "classic" for professionals and graduate students. A lot of work and carefully considered argument went into this book. As I said early on in this review, this is not a book for the novice or those unwilling to shift their conceptual biases. Given these constraints on an audience, most readers are in for a truly eye-opening experience.

REFERENCES

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