Some Useful Resources for Students Who Are Tempted to Bring Enlightenment to Errant Non-Behaviorists

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Correcting misconceptions is no work for amateurs. And, by “amateurs,” I mean those who have not read Judith Martin’s *Miss Manner’s Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior* (1982) and Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936).

Neither book is on the standard syllabus for behavior analysts in training. They should be (Todd, 2009). Underlying all the practical advice they contain about comportment in challenging social and professional situations, we find a set of useful general principles. In the former work, we are advised to avoid unduly discomforting those with whom we interact—without unduly compromising ourselves. In the latter, we are to get people to agree with us by making them want to do so. Martin’s book is about the problems associated with using aversive control (see also Sidman, 1989). Carnegie’s is about manipulating establishing operations and using reinforcement to our benefit (see also Laraway et al., 2003; Michael, 1993).

A discerning behavior analyst, Martin reminds us of the considerable importance of context in making an uninvited contribution in a social setting, especially a correction. Unless the feedback is sincerely invited and genuinely desired, or entirely innocuous, the risk is to be impolite—and ineffective. We are also reminded that if the feedback is not immediately and tangibly helpful to the recipient, and not carefully composed, it is likely to be rejected. In this regard, one might also profit from reading Festinger’s *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957). The term “cognitive” in the title notwithstanding, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* is substantially about verbal behavior with the function of reducing the conditioned aversive stimulus value of obvious inconsistencies in an individual’s other

behavior. The low response-cost option for a person confronted with a fundamental error is usually not correcting the error, but adding more verbal behavior to justify or rationalize it.

While Martin helps us get through potentially troublesome situations unscathed by employing a set of sophisticated self-control mechanisms, Carnegie is all about how to get others to find us reinforcing and agree with us. Full of illustrative parables, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* summarizes its advice in enumerated tables at the end of each of its six sections. (An updated edition appeared in 1981.) Employing titles such as “Twelve Ways to Win People to Your Way of Thinking” (p. 104) and “Nine Ways To Change People Without Giving Offense Or Arousing Resentment” (p. 172), Carnegie outlines a program of using social reinforcement to shape the behavior you hope to get in an environment deliberately divested of as many aversive elements as possible.

In “Nine Ways to Change People” (pp. 172–200), for example, we find these items: “Begin with praise and honest appreciation,” “Praise the slightest improvement and praise every improvement,” “Make the fault seem easy to correct,” and “Make the other person happy about doing the thing you suggest” (p. 200). If you were to conclude that Carnegie’s book influenced Aubrey Daniels’ *Bringing Out the Best in People* (2000), you would not be mistaken. If my saying so is not convincing, the reader should find a copy of the 1936 edition of the book and look up the story of Pete Barlow at the top of page 186. Then, of course, read Daniels.

The upshot of all this is that any attempt to directly correct misconceptions is fraught with social peril and can even make things worse. Festinger reminds us of a peculiar reality: “Rats and people come to love things for which they have suffered” (1961, p. 11). Those things can include the false beliefs we are calling attention to.

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The student is further disadvantaged by social role and inexperience. As much as we would like to believe in the primacy of ideas over the superficialities of age, status, and rhetorical proficiency, those factors can color the reactions of even the most egalitarian. And, if there is a broader audience for the remedial effort, the well-meaning and perfectly correct student might be seen as rude or disruptive rather than helpful—particularly because the other students may not be all that concerned about the issue and might regard the now-conflicting information as confusing. Should we attempt to correct errors? Certainly. But, we should recognize that doing so is a finesse sport requiring a high degree of skill and practice.

Rather than the haphazard approach, the student should consider applying the collective wisdom of our field (as given practical form by Martin and Carnegie): ignore the misconceptions to the extent possible and gently shape better alternatives. (Or just wait until you have a class of your own to teach.) Any of these methods is more likely to have a better long-term positive impact than one-shot correctives done badly.

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