

Further Comments on Person-Centered Approaches

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Holburn (1997) correctly characterized the typical conditions (“unfavorable environments”) faced by behavior analysts who work in most congregate care settings. Due in part to counterhabilitative bureaucratic and regulatory contingencies (Meinhold & Mulick, 1990), behavior analysts (and other staff) often have little control over the variables of which challenging behavior is a function. As a result, much behavioral programming in these settings constitutes little more than marginally effective default technologies (Iwata, 1988) that are aimed at behavioral topographies rather than functions.

Holburn (1997) further described person-centered planning approaches, which offer behavior analysts a chance to control, or otherwise influence on a molar level, the major variables that cause challenging behavior. These approaches actually arose in part as an antibehavioral reaction to the “controlling technologies” of our field (e.g., Lovett, 1996; Smull & Harrison, 1992). Based on semantic confusion, misconceptions, or ideological predisposition, some segments of the developmental disabilities field came to view many behavioral techniques, including contingent reinforcement (positive or negative), as unacceptable “control” procedures.

Because person-centered processes and outcomes have been largely anecdotal “stories,” couched in nonbehavioral language, and often at least implicitly antibehavioral, our field has not paid much attention to these approach-

es. However, person-centered approaches have become ubiquitous (including language in California’s developmental disability laws), and behaviorists, including Holburn and others (e.g., Wagner & Martin, 1995), have begun to describe these processes from a behavioral perspective and propose a role for them in the behavior analyst’s repertoire.

As Holburn (1997) noted, person-centered planners often report reductions in challenging behavior as an outcome of the process. Nothing is magic about this outcome. Behavior is lawful. Viewed from a behavior-analytic conceptual framework, this reduction in challenging behavior likely occurs for one or both of the following reasons: (a) The person-centered process minimizes or eliminates the aversive events that the person’s challenging behavior has historically escaped or avoided, (b) the process maximizes those positive reinforcers that the behavior has historically produced. The process has thus successfully reduced or eliminated the establishing operations associated with the challenging behavior. Indeed, the person-centered process of identifying preferences and choices is similar to conducting functional assessments and analyses. Both processes may include structured interviews, observations and trials in natural situations, and ultimately result in the identification of events the person avoids, escapes, or maximizes. Also, the person-centered focus on allowing the consumer to choose personal goals and the means for achieving those goals shares much in common with behavioral social validation procedures. This person-centered emphasis on choice is not foreign to behavior analysis. Choice has long been an area of behavioral research and application. Fi-

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nally, many person-centered interventions could be characterized as antecedent or ecological manipulations (Wagner, 1999).

Perhaps the most pragmatic description of the relationship between these approaches and behavior analysis was provided by Risley (1996):

In general, there is a negative correlation between the flexibility of life arrangements available and the technical precision of the behavior programming needed. The wider the latitude available for modifying the life arrangements for a person with challenging behaviors, the less precise and technical the behavior programming needs to be. The opposite is also true in that the less flexible a person's life arrangements are, the more technical and precise the behavior programming must be. (p. 429)

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