

AVOIDING THE COUNTERCONTROL OF APPLIED BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS

L. KEITH MILLER

UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

Steve Fawcett (1991) has performed an important service for the field of applied behavior analysis. His recommendations provide us with practical methods for avoiding countercontrol of our practices by normal adults. Following his recommendations may accelerate the acceptance of our practices by normal adults in community settings. Following them may also solve some perplexing problems in the maintenance and dissemination of our practices with dependent populations in institutional settings.

Skinner has suggested that attempts by one person to control another may evoke countercontrol (Skinner, 1953). He predicted that aversive, exploitative, or even deliberate control would evoke countercontrol. He argued that countercontrol is often a beneficial if crude step in the design of an effective culture (Skinner, 1973). The balance between control and countercontrol may achieve a temporary equilibrium, but the resulting culture may not take the future into account sufficiently to have survival value (Skinner, 1978, pp. 16-32).

Skinner has consistently recommended that we build our interventions around positive reinforcement partly to avoid countercontrol (e.g., Skinner, 1978, pp. 3-16). That may be easier said than done. Anyone who has worked with normal adults knows how easily evoked is their countercontrolling repertoire. One probable reason for this sensitivity is that attempts to control others in order to gain an advantage are so pervasive in our culture. However, another reason may lie in our own approach to designing interventions.

Our approach to designing interventions owes something to the history of the experimental anal-

ysis of behavior. We have adopted much of our approach from basic researchers. Yet behavior analysts conducting basic research often create aversive situations for their subjects. They enclose their non-human subjects in experimental chambers and thereby prevent deprivation, low reinforcer density, and aversive stimulation from evoking avoidance and escape from the situation and aggressive responses toward the experimenter. The longstanding tendency for applied behavior analysts to select human subjects who have been legally placed in restrictive institutions that minimize these normal accompaniments of aversive stimulation mirrors this practice. It also suggests that applied behavior analysts, too, may create aversive situations.

Selecting legally dependent subjects for intervention has been a successful strategy for developing an applied methodology. The strategy has minimized the size of the step from basic to applied research because of the similarity of nonhumans-in-a-chamber to humans-in-an-institution. Consequently, we have been able to develop a methodology appropriate to applied problems. We have learned how to gain access to settings. We have learned how to discover and observe behavior with applied significance. We have developed appropriate experimental designs, intervention strategies, and methods of analysis.

However, that said, we should examine the price paid for this approach. Some of the most perplexing problems encountered by applied behavior analysis stem from our failure to learn how to work with normal adults. Specifically, we have not learned how to develop interventions that rely on positive reinforcement for all participants, including the normal adults who implement them. In short, we have not learned how to avoid evoking countercontrol.

One perplexing problem is the failure of the normal adults who staff and administer settings of

Address correspondence to L. Keith Miller, Department of Human Development, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045.

interest to maintain interventions in our absence. The behavior analysis literature is studded with cases of these adults abandoning our interventions soon after we terminate their close supervision (Bassett & Blanchard, 1977; Couch, Miller, Johnson, & Welsh, 1986; Wolf, 1982). It has long been accepted lore that such abandonment is typical (Malott, 1974). Schwartz and Baer (1991) have argued that when an intervention is not acceptable to its consumers they may engage in a variety of countercontrolling behaviors including "not implementing some or all of [a] program's procedures after the program consultant leaves" (p. 190). Thus, the widespread lack of program maintenance may be an example of countercontrol.

Another problem is the failure of normal adults who control the setting of interest to adopt our interventions in the first place (Lamal, 1986; Stolz, 1981). Hung (1987) has argued that our "programs often require an extensive change in life or work style, vigorous training, continuous monitoring, and they can become aversive since they take away reinforcing activities afforded by modern life . . ." (p. 13). Thus, not adopting such programs may be a response that avoids the aversive features of the program. It may be an example of countercontrol.

Yet another perplexing problem is that we have done little to implement Skinner's vision of behavior analysis as a method for solving community problems, let alone society's broader ills (e.g., Skinner, 1972). Behavior analysis has not been notably prolific in publishing research reporting successful solutions to problems involving normal adults. Thus, even though our interventions are demonstrably superior to alternatives, normal adults are not clamoring for their use.

If our failure to develop and disseminate interventions that survive in the real world among normal adults reflects countercontrol, how can we avoid countercontrol? One whimsical answer, that may reflect our roots in the methodology appropriate to nonhumans-in-a-chamber only too well, has been supplied by Ruben Ardila in *Walden Three* (1990). His premise is that a military dictator comes to power and appoints a behavior analyst to design

the nation's cultural practices! Surely we need an approach that is more likely to come to pass. We need to add to or even change some of our practices so that our interventions do not evoke countercontrol from relevant normal adults.

Steve Fawcett may be the applied behavior analyst who is most experienced at avoiding countercontrol by normal adults. He has developed successful behavioral interventions with people from all walks of life. He has collaborated with low-income white, black, and Hispanic clients and staff (Fawcett & Miller, 1975). He has collaborated with people having various disabilities but fully capable of resisting control (Suarez de Balcazar, Fawcett, & Balcazar, 1988). He has collaborated with normal householders and sanitation workers (Stokes & Fawcett, 1977). And he has collaborated with legislators (Fawcett, Seekins, & Jason, 1987). That he has published elegant experimental analyses with such a wide range of normal adults testifies to his skill at avoiding countercontrol. That countercontrol is readily evoked by such work is attested to by his several brushes with attempts to stop his interventions.

Fawcett has provided us with a highly practical guide for avoiding countercontrol. The essence of his advice is to establish collaborative relationships with the people one seeks to help. He suggests that asking these people and their advocates social validity questions is a step in the right direction. But he advises us to start earlier in the process and get their input on how to frame the question and what goals they value. He advises us to become their students and learn from them.

Underlying his approach is an axiom from community organizing. The axiom is that the organizer's goal is to work himself or herself out of a job. In other words, the goal is to develop an organization and a membership with the skills necessary to run the organization without further help. This parallels Skinner's (1978) admonition that an intervention "is not finished until [it] works more efficiently as a system without further intervention. . . . No cultural practice designed through the application of an experimental analysis of behavior involves a behavior modifier who *remains* in con-

tol" (p. 15). To date we have few, if any, exemplars of such an intervention. I think that such exemplars will arise when we take Fawcett's advice and collaborate with the staff, administration, and consumers of our interventions to develop interventions cooperatively that will not evoke any form of countercontrol and will instead evoke and reinforce behaviors that maintain effective interventions.

Failing to evoke countercontrol while evoking such maintenance behaviors is evidence that an intervention is not aversive and that it leads to reinforcement. Altus, Welsh, and Miller (1991) have recommended that we probe for program maintenance by withdrawing supervision. If the consumers maintain the intervention, then this is evidence that countercontrol will not be a problem. If the intervention is not maintained, supervision should be reinstated. Further collaboration can then be pursued until another probe seems justified. Fawcett's recommendations greatly improve the chance that such collaboration will be fruitful.

Fawcett labels his recommendations "values," which implies that following them may produce reinforcing consequences (Skinner, 1972). The reinforcing consequences may be that they will enable us to work with normal adults to alter situations constructively so as to solve important social problems. Their independent survival would assure us of their validity to the target population. We should not be surprised if this is a necessary if not sufficient condition for dissemination.

REFERENCES

- Altus, D. E., Welsh, T. M., & Miller, L. K. (1991). A technology for program maintenance: Programming key researcher behaviors in a student housing cooperative. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 24*, 667-675.
- Ardila, R. (1990). *Walden three: A scientific utopia*. New York: Carlton Press.
- Bassett, J. E., & Blanchard, E. B. (1977). The effect of the absence of close supervision on the use of response cost in a prison token economy. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 10*, 375-379.
- Couch, R. W., Miller, L. K., Johnson, M., & Welsh, T. M. (1986). Some considerations for behavior analysts developing social change interventions. *Behavior Analysis and Social Action, 5*, 9-13.
- Fawcett, S. B. (1991). Some values guiding community research and action. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 24*, 621-636.
- Fawcett, S. B., & Miller, L. K. (1975). Training public-speaking behavior: An experimental analysis and social validation. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 8*, 125-135.
- Fawcett, S. B., Seekins, T., & Jason, L. A. (1987). Policy research and child passenger safety legislation: A case study and experimental evaluation. *Journal of Social Issues, 43*, 133-148.
- Hung, D. W. (1987). A matter of self-reinforcing? *ABA Newsletter, 10*, 13-14.
- Lamal, P. A. (1986). On facing reality. *ABA Newsletter, 9*, 6.
- Malott, R. W. (1974). Focus #4. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 7*, inside back cover.
- Schwartz, I. W., & Baer, D. M. (1991). Social validity assessments: Is current practice state of the art? *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 24*, 189-204.
- Skinner, B. F. (1953). *Science and human behavior*. New York: Macmillan.
- Skinner, B. F. (1972). *Beyond freedom and dignity*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Skinner, B. F. (1973). Answers for my critics. In H. Wheeler (Ed.), *Beyond the punitive society* (pp. 256-266). San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.
- Skinner, B. F. (1978). *Reflections on behaviorism and society*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Stokes, T. F., & Fawcett, S. B. (1977). Evaluating municipal policy: An analysis of a refuse packaging program. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 10*, 391-398.
- Stolz, S. B. (1981). Adoption of innovations from applied behavioral research: "Does anybody care?" *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 14*, 491-505.
- Suarez de Balcazar, Y. W., Fawcett, S. B., & Balcazar, F. E. (1988). Effects of environmental design and police enforcement on violations of a handicapped parking ordinance. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 21*, 291-298.
- Wolf, M. M. (1982). Program survival: A case study in the development and maintenance of a behavioral intervention program. In B. Bolton & R. Roessler (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Symposium on Applied Research Methodology* (pp. 43-49). Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Rehabilitation Research and Training Center.

Received September 4, 1991

Final acceptance September 7, 1991

Action Editor, R. Mark Mathews