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SOME ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF SHORT-TERM WORKSHOPS IN THE PRINCIPLES AND METHODS OF BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION[1]

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Workshops and seminars to expose different sectors of the professional community to the principles and applications of behavior modification are briefly discussed. The possible misapplication of procedures by conference participants, whose only exposure to behavioral methods has been at these workshops is viewed as a potentially serious ethical issue. It is suggested that the goals of such seminars and workshops must be clarified, and methods of evaluation of the participants' skills devised, lest we contribute to the misapplication of procedures and to the criticism that behavioral methods are unethical approaches to treatment.

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There appears to be an increasing demand from different sectors of the professional community for exposure to the principles of behavior modification and the application of these to practise problems. Many of us trained in behavioral methods have responded by presenting brief papers, seminars, and workshops of varying duration. Common to these approaches is the attempt to disseminate much information in a brief period of time, rarely exceeding one week.

In recent months, I have observed the practise behaviors of a number of professionals who have attended such workshops. Frequently, I have witnessed the nonsystematic application of behavioral principles that suggests a lack of understanding of the conditions under which they operate and a lack of knowledge of the effects of random attempts to modify behavior. Are we reinforcing the misapplication of behavioral principles when we make the relatively brief presentations that characterize these seminars? Stated in another way, this question asks if enough information can be disseminated in a one- or two-day, or even a one-week workshop to allow participants properly to apply the principles taught?

As behavioral programs increase in popularity, our critics are finding expression in the popular media. Those of us who teach and practise these methods have held a position that is quite opposite to that of our critics; specifically, we have considered that the systematic application of empirically validated principles, that can be fully explicated to our clients, and that can be monitored as to process and outcome, are perhaps the most ethical means of accomplishing the changes that our clients desire. However, the premises upon which our ethical position are based, are valid only insofar as the would-be practitioner has sufficient knowledge to apply principles systematically.

There are no easy answers to the questions that have been raised here. I have personally attempted to resolve some of these difficulties in one workshop-consultation that I am at present offering. The procedure consists of first, conducting two, 3-hr workshops, covering basic principles and procedures, *followed by weekly consultations* on the application of the procedures taught, all of which will be followed by additional workshop sessions that will focus upon specific problems that the participants encounter in applying methods with their particular client population.

An additional way in which some of the prob-

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lems presented by workshops might be handled is suggested by Patterson's work (Patterson, Cobb, and Ray, 1974) in training families in parent-child management skills. His requirement that participants in his workshops be able to "accurately respond to a programmed text", covering basic concepts and their applications, might be extended to the type of workshop herein considered by imposing a contingency for admission that would require attendees to demonstrate a mastery of similar information. The time spent in the actual sessions might then be best devoted to the application of these procedures. Collecting observational data as well as planning appropriate programs, for example, could then be more closely supervised and the conductor of the workshop more assured of a uniform level of knowledge and skill acquisition.

Concern with qualitative issues in training has been raised in the literature and focused on such diverse groups as professionals, families, (Wolf, Phillips, and Fixsen, 1972), (Ferber, Keeley, and Shemberg, 1974) and delinquents (Fixsen, Phillips, and Wolf, 1973) and has been addressed by Agras[2] (1973) and others who have focused upon the issue of licensing for behavior modifiers.

The problems suggested by this literature are compounded in workshop situations, not only by the time factor already noted, but by the difficulties involved in maintaining any follow-up contact to evaluate the practise skills of workshop participants. It is not unusual, for example, for individuals attending workshops to travel from geographically distant points, or for the workshop instructor himself to travel to distant areas.

The problems involved in maintaining contact are serious indeed, even when physical distance is not an issue; the addition of such a variable simply compounds an already complex area. It does not seem inappropriate to suggest that these issues be addressed in a professional forum where the different approaches now being employed to conduct workshops be shared, and from which suggested guidelines might be developed and disseminated to the professional community.

Many of us are understandably interested in "turning-on" other individuals to behavioral methods; for quite some time, our only professional reinforcers have come from colleagues who hold opinions and views that are similar to our own; hence, the professional as well as the monetary incentives for conducting these workshops and training seminars are strong indeed, and the behaviors that they maintain will probably not decrease without competing contingencies of equal strength.

It is the opinion of this author, that the misapplication of behavioral methods is aversive enough to create such competing contingencies, and to force us to look at ways in which we are disseminating information to the practise community, the outcomes of the present methods of doing this, and to consider structuring approaches to this that will increase the probabilities of the appropriate application of behavioral methods. If the observations that I have briefly noted hold true elsewhere, this will provide further "fuel for the fire" of our critics, and if we are indeed reinforcing the misapplication of principles, then we are likewise contributing to the charges that behavioral methods are unethical approaches to treatment.

[2]I doubt that licensing would speak to the problems raised here. The practitioners considered in this paper are not likely to call themselves behavior therapists or behavior modifiers, and as such, would not come under the purview of such licensing laws. We are more concerned here with individuals who will add "bits and pieces" of behavioral methodology to their already eclectic practise repertoires.

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