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THE VALUE OF EVERYDAY EXAMPLES IN THE TEACHING OF LEARNING: A COMMENT PROMPTED BY MACHADO AND SILVA (1998)

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Why are so few psychology students and professors interested in the study of learning? Part of the answer lies in the techniques we use for teaching behavioral psychology and communicating its relevance to numerous aspects of life. We add to this journal's discussion of the teaching of learning by explaining the importance of using examples drawn from everyday life: Numerous familiar examples provide powerful pedagogical tools for showing the importance of learning theory and helping students learn behavior principles. This approach does not exclude using other strategies and techniques in our quest to communicate the value of learning theory and teach our behavioral science in meaningful and thought-provoking ways.

Key words: teaching, learning, behavior, psychology, behaviorism, everyday life

In their article on the teaching of the psychology of learning, Machado and Silva (1998) cite data suggesting that our specialty, the study of learning, ''is a stagnant, if not dying, subdivision of psychology'' (p. 215). They cite a recent review of advertisements for employment positions in psychology and found that only 2% of ads were for people who specialize in learning and behavior. Although most nonacademics believe that learning is of pivotal importance in understanding family life, child rearing, education, the work place, democracy and social change, it seems that few psychology departments are interested in the topic.

Machado and Silva want to halt or slow the eclipse of learning psychology and perhaps even restore it to the exciting level that many of us experienced when we discovered the power and beauty of learning theory. Machado and Silva suggest that we can advance our discipline by teaching learning in ways that help students ''think like scientists'' and grapple with ''some of the deepest philosophical controversies'' (p. 224). They are dismayed by the ''disproportionate emphasis on facts, procedures, and everyday examples'' that they see in current texts and courses (p. 215).

There are multiple methods for helping students—who will be the professionals and leaders of the future—see the power and excitement of learning and behavioral psychology. The academic model proposed by Machado and Silva is not only legitimate, but admirable. As science increasingly permeates modern society, we need to help as many students as possible learn to think like scientists and to understand behavioral science. Our 30 years of teaching experience leads us to believe that ''facts, procedures, and everyday examples'' are more valuable in showing the importance of learning principles to the majority of students than Machado and Silva recognize. We have seen countless students become excited about behavioral facts and specialize in fields that center on learning after they study it in connection with thousands of examples from everyday life. As students begin to see how learning principles relate to their own lives, they often understand how important it is to learn about learning. Part of the reason why learning has not already captured a larger place in the discipline of psychology may be that learning theorists have failed to stress its relevance to all aspects of our lives. Have we painted ourselves into a box—or experimental space—and neglected the larger world?

For years we have pondered various ways to reinvigorate and advance the study of learning. We concur with Skinner[1] when he said, ''We happy few, but why so few?'' To advance

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[1] ''We Happy Few, But Why So Few?'' is the title Skinner chose for his presentation to the 12th annual convention of the Association for Behavior Analysis, May 1986.

our discipline, we need to teach as many undergraduates and lay people as possible about learning principles. In order to do this, we need to demonstrate the importance of learning theory and behavior principles for understanding countless facets of human life and animal behavior.

Over the past 30 years, we have been so bothered by the lack of general interest in behavioral psychology that we have explored numerous ways of teaching learning. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, we taught it with examples from animal research, focusing especially on nonhuman primates, our own research specialty at the time. Next we included behavioral research on children. By the late 1970s, we began including case histories about all aspects of human life, saving the best examples to illustrate a book we were writing on learning theory. We used large and small classes to obtain student feedback on the best ways to link theories and examples so that students could remember them easily and accurately. In 1981, we published the first edition of our book, *Behavior Principles in Everyday Life,* and we have continued to collect student feedback on it every year for the past 18 years. Today, we use the third edition of this book (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1998) to teach small seminars of five students, medium classes of 40, and large classes of 275. We spend hours each quarter talking with our students about behavioral psychology and continue to keep written records of the students' responses to the various techniques we explore for teaching the topic.

Year after year, students repeatedly tell us that everyday examples are crucial for grasping the relevance of behavioral psychology and mastering the details of the numerous learning principles that we study. Concrete illustrations of specific behavior patterns enmeshed in complex real-life contingencies allow them to master the abstract psychological principles quickly and easily. Studying behavioral theory in terms of easily recognized examples allows students to focus most of their learning efforts on figuring out the abstract principles, because the easily recognized examples give them a solid and familiar foundation from which to work. Our students report having numerous ''Eureka'' experiences, which may indicate positive reinforcement effects, as they read behavioral analyses of everyday life and think: ''So that's why I do that!'' There is much to be said for teaching behavioral principles and functional analysis with frequent and immediate positive reinforcement.

We believe that teaching behavioral psychology benefits from both the sophisticated, scientific approach championed by Machado and Silva and the practical approach of analyzing everyday activities. One favors abstract knowledge; the other favors concrete pragmatics.

We have had the greatest success by using the method of successive approximations. At first, we use scores of everyday examples to make learning theory accessible and exciting to large groups of potentially interested students. Many find all the benefits they need after taking the first several steps of successive approximations. Others find that the early steps are so rewarding that they hunger to learn more advanced and abstract behavioral concepts. Students who carry through and finish John's course on pragmatism eventually understand the empirically based philosophy on which behaviorism is founded (Baldwin, 1986). Students who want to see the fullest ''big picture'' of life learn that abstract and concrete knowledge can be coupled together harmoniously.

Because behavioral psychology can be useful in all aspects of life, we as professionals should explain the applicability of behavioral principles in every domain we see to be important. Too many people think that behavior principles apply only to pigeons, rats, and monkeys in boxes—or to people with severe disabilities. They do not know that learning theory applies to them, their families, friendships, schools, and the larger society. Possibly our discipline would not be in eclipse if we repeatedly showed people how to apply learning principles to friendship, love, marriage, family, children, education, reasoning, business, athletics, and countless other aspects of life. We admit that this is not easily done: We practiced for years before this valuable approach came effortlessly.

Many of our students are eager to understand themselves and their complex lives. Most are at an age when they are gaining independence from their families of origin and struggling to create their own unique lives. They see how complex the world is and won-

der how they are going to build a life that they will find rewarding. In essence, they are hungry to know which kinds of behavior to learn in order to function well within the contingencies that face them. Many students have pressing questions regarding their habits, emotions, thoughts, relationships, prior learning experiences, and choices of future pathways. If we forget where the majority of our students' interests lie, we may end up teaching to very small classes and see an ever-diminishing demand for professors who specialize in the psychology of learning.

Why not share our science as widely as possible? Skinner wrote several popular books, such as *Walden Two, Science and Human Behavior, Beyond Freedom and Dignity,* and *About Behaviorism,* that contained numerous examples from everyday life. They stimulated interest and debate, helping large numbers of readers learn about behaviorism. They interested scholars inside and outside of psychology departments in the study of learning, broadening the range of topics studied via the functional analysis of behavior. Are we doing for future generations what Skinner did for ours?

On our campus, students say they have heard the Freudian model over and over, although most reject it, failing to see its relevance. Many find that cognitive psychology is more valuable than the Freudian approach, because it presents theories about stereotyping, cognitive dissonance, authoritarianism, misattribution, group-think, low-balling, primacy effects, sleeper effects, and other everyday topics that fascinate many people. Sociobiology interests students who are eager to understand why males and females think and act so differently about sex, and it is noteworthy that sociobiologists are not loathe to use everyday examples about sex, lust, and love to teach their theories.

Why not teach behavior principles with numerous examples that show their power in dealing with art, creativity, sports, problem solving, self-understanding, self-guidance, friendship, love, sex, child rearing, education, and therapy? Don't we believe that behavior principles can explain more about people's daily lives than can Freudian theory, cognitive psychology, and sociobiology?

A critic might challenge our approach and question if teaching with everyday examples can help to create new information rather than merely teaching old principles as static dogma. Are we merely pandering to the masses if we use everyday examples?

Relying on years of teaching experience, we would like to allay these fears. The use of varied examples often stimulates students to contemplate events in their own lives that are related to but not identical with our examples. Some of the kinds of behavior that interest the next generation have not yet been studied via functional analysis. Concrete everyday examples often spark students to ask behavioral questions that we may not have previously confronted, and their questions challenge us to explore new research areas and push the frontiers of behavioral science. Some of our most inquisitive students may pursue their intellectual investigations into domains that further expand our discipline: We have had a few students who have done that.

Everyday examples allow us to teach large audiences and to reach students who can use learning principles when they become the next cohort of teachers, counselors, doctors, nurses, business people, coaches, physical therapists, and college professors. Many more students could become excited by and benefit from the behavioral principles if we made them as practical, readily accessible, and interesting as possible. Teaching the principles of learning through everyday examples piques many students' interest, making them eager to learn more behavioral information and helping them pose questions that could potentially expand behavioral applications in various sectors of society. For example, recent studies show the power of behavioral modification in helping people with Alzheimer's disease: It is far better for caregivers to provide positive social reinforcement for the many activities that seniors need for vigorous and self-reliant lives than to put those activities on extinction, as when caregivers place Alzheimer's patients in passive roles by doing more than is needed for them (Barinaga, 1998). The more areas of life in which behavior principles can be used, the stronger our science will grow.

Machado and Silva are eager to teach the ''game of science'' in their classes (p. 227). This is a wonderful goal, and most of us have ways of communicating our enthusiasm about and commitment to the scientific method, al-

though each of us does this in unique ways. But we must remember that many of our students learn about empirical research, statistics, and scientific methods in various other courses, in both the ''hard'' and ''soft'' sciences. Each of us must decide how much to focus on science in our courses, but it is important for us to teach our students the learning principles they can find only in our courses. Most of us have only 10 or 15 weeks to acquaint our students with the psychology of learning. The more loving attention we devote to showing our students the power of behavior principles in useful applications, the better we help our students learn the details and functional value of our science, which they will not learn in most other courses.

In addition, we need to empathize with the many students who find it difficult to grasp the importance of our behavioral concepts and jargon and help them to understand how to use these concepts with their families, friends, significant others, or in self-modification. Students appreciate us and our science when we help them master valuable principles and see their usefulness—showing how, for example, differential reinforcement can reduce the need for punishment and bring greater happiness by rewarding people for doing healthy, positive social activities that minimize problems and bring generous natural rewards. Teaching students how to carry out functional analysis to identify when crying is or is not an operant behavior is also useful for them. Every powerful behavioral tool we can give our students is a gift that helps them learn, change, and navigate their way through life and appreciate the courses in which they acquired such valuable information.

Some of our earlier students who first learned about behavior principles in terms of everyday life have earned PhDs and become professors. But most of our former students who liked behavioral psychology have gone into primary or secondary education, marriage and family counseling, behavior modification, business psychology, management, public health, and other practical fields in which they use learning theory to guide their daily decisions and work. We see all of these former students as ambassadors who defend behavioral psychology when confronted with people who do not understand it. The more that society as a whole sees the value of behavior principles, the better the chances that our discipline will survive, receive support, prosper, and hire scholars who specialize in the study of learning and behavior.

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