

COERCION AND ITS FALLOUT

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Sidman wrote *Coercion and Its Fallout* as a personal statement of concern about the future course of humanity. While the book is a personal statement, the personal nature of the book cannot be separated from Sidman's considerable and deserved reputation as a professional behavior analyst.

Sidman believes that we, as a species, must "change our conduct" if we are going to succeed "at least to postpone the current headlong rush toward extinction of the species." He believes that the development of a science of behavior is virtually the only event that offers us any hope for survival.

At the root of our problems, according to Sidman, is the widely accepted belief by parents, teachers, politicians, bureaucrats, business and labor leaders, and religious leaders, among others, that coercion is the natural order of things. Most, if not all, members of society believe that behavior control is necessary if society is going to work. Sidman does not argue against the necessity of behavior control. He does, however, argue strongly against the widespread view of behavior control as coercive control.

The root of social evil, so to speak, is not the use of coercive behavior control per se but the reciprocal and escalating relationship between coercive control and countercontrol. The issue is not whether or not there should be behavior control but rather whether or not it will be done scientifically. Scientific behavior control, based on the science of behavior analysis, is control that is exerted systematically, effectively, thoughtfully, and most important, humanely. Scientific behavior control is control through positive reinforcement as elucidated in the science of behavior analysis, not through negative reinforcement and punishment, that is, coercive control.

Sidman allows that there may be a few extreme instances where coercive control can be justified, but they represent exceptions, not the rule for behavior control. Even when justified, Sidman argues that such instances will only occur because of mistakes made by agents of control, ignorance, or emergency situations. In the rare case where coercive control is justified, Sidman argues it should be a last resort and should be only a temporary expedient providing an opportunity to put into place reinforcement-based techniques for behavior control.

Sidman argues that, in addition to the "main effects" expected as an outcome of coercion, there are also "secondary effects" that are often of greater significance than the intended effect, such as the probability of other behavior being increased in the punished individual. One of the outcomes of the use of coercion is escape behavior.

Sidman discusses a number of examples of escape behavior initiated by coercive environments. Only those examples directly related to education will be cited. Escape behavior is expressed through two basic forms. First, escape may take the form of "tuning out." Educationally speaking, tuning out is evident in students who are nonparticipants in the educational program. Educators frequently label these students as underachievers. Second, escape may take the form of "dropping out." Students who are prevented from tuning out or dropping out — that is, escape is not permitted — usually become discipline problems. Educators often label these students as "trouble makers," emotionally disturbed, behavior disordered, and more recently, as socially maladjusted. Sidman would say that such students are responding to a coercive environment with attempts at countercontrol.

Another outcome of the use of coercion is avoidance. Initially, escape is the more likely outcome of coercion because something must be experienced in some way before one can respond to it. However, avoidance is more adaptive than escape, and if the conditions for coercion can be discriminated, the circumstances associated with coercion will subsequently be avoided if avoidance is possible. Even when there are significant negative consequences related to avoidance, they will usually not be powerful enough to prevent avoidance because the reinforcing consequences of avoidance are immediate and the punitive consequences of avoidance are usually delayed.

Earlier, dropping out of school was given as an example of escape behavior. However, the dropout's behavior is maintained, at least in part, by avoidance. That is, by staying away from school, the dropout is able to prevent further contact with a coercive environment and this avoidance behavior has the immediate and maintaining consequence of negative reinforcement. Clearly for most dropouts, lack of education has some significant, long-term punitive consequences. Unfortunately, these consequences are often so delayed as to have little impact on current behavior. By the time these consequences are experienced and begin to impact on current behavior, it is usually too late to make appropriate adaptive responses.

In addition to the delayed punitive consequences of avoidance, there is usually the compounding effect of positive reinforcement becoming associated with the avoidance behavior. Once out of school, the dropout frequently comes into contact with new contingencies of positive reinforcement that significantly contribute to the maintenance of the avoidance behavior. In some cases, the positive reinforcement is relatively benign (e.g., a job). In other cases, the positive reinforcement may be destructive (e.g., involvement in a subculture such as the drug subculture or a cult).

One point made by Sidman that is discussed relative to many areas of life but which has particular relevance for education and special education is reflected in the following quote:

If we regard punishment as the only way to manage others, then we are not likely to pay much attention to desirable conduct. We automatically adopt a destructive approach to behavior management. We try to destroy unwanted behavior, overlooking the likelihood that we could get rid of the unwanted conduct just by constructing new behavior to replace it. (p. 213)

Implicit in this quote is the guiding principle espoused by Sidman, that is, "Positive reinforcement works and coercion is dangerous."

Sidman argues that most reinforcement in education is negative and that the all too infrequent positive reinforcement found in educational settings is seldom contingent on learning. He suggests that the first step in "curing" the ills of education is to teach educators the techniques needed to turn schools into positively reinforcing environments. In order to make schools reinforcing environments, educators must forsake, with possibly rare exceptions, the use of coercive techniques for behavior management and teaching.

Not only must educators actively seek opportunities to provide positive reinforcement for good behavior and accomplishment, they must also give up the belief that learning must be a trial-and-error process. Errors in learning must be extinguished and extinction is ultimately a coercive technique because it depends upon withholding positive reinforcement. The solution, according to Sidman is not, of course, to also reinforce errors but rather to minimize errors through the use of carefully individualized programming. Educators must be taught the skills needed to provide "errorless learning" and provide a teaching environment supportive of this approach.

The effects of coercive educational environments on students are, following Sidman's analysis, clearly visible in students who simply withdraw from the tasks of education and who may also exhibit symptoms that sometimes lead to labels such as neurosis, mental illness, or emotional disturbance, or who engage in either aggressive or destructive countercontrol that sometimes leads to labels such as conduct disorder, delinquent, or socially maladjusted. The effects of coercive educational environments are also evident in students who have literally escaped from and "succeeded" in avoiding coercion by dropping out of school. If Sidman's analysis is accepted, an indirect measure of educational coerciveness for a given teacher, school, or system would be an index based on the degree of underachievement, referrals for behavior problems, and dropouts produced.

For the potential reader of Sidman's book, it should be noted that his use of the terms negative reinforcement and punishment are a little confusing. At times, his use of negative reinforcement reads as though he means punishment. One must keep in mind that both employ an aversive stimulus and it is the aversiveness that is being referred to rather than the actual operation being performed with the stimulus. While it might be possible to marshal arguments against some of Sidman's analysis, this book makes some very important contributions toward understanding the causes of and possible remedies for many problems prevalent in education including not only problems of students but also of teachers and administrators. Sidman's book provides a thoughtful and useful attempt to apply the principles of behavioral science to the problems of contemporary society, of which education is but one example. It is recommended reading for anyone who wishes a new perspective on social problems.

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