In the spring of 2005 four of my students decided to investigate bystanders' reactions to public cell phone conversations held in Spanish or English. The four students, Spanish-speakers from four different countries, observed that bystanders are often irritated when forced to listen to someone speaking on a cell phone, but the students felt that English-speaking bystanders were more irritated when the overheard conversation was in Spanish. At the time it struck me that when I started teaching, nearly 30 years ago, this topic would never have been introduced. Apart from the fact that cell phones had not yet been invented, the engagement between students of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds was not nearly as commonplace, or as clearly articulated as it is today. This is not to say that there was no cultural diversity back then. Although the overwhelming majority of my students were white Europeans, they differed in other ways. Some were women and some men; some were Catholic and some Protestant; some were of Irish descent and some of Greek descent; some were psychology majors and some physics majors. If we define culture in terms of shared patterns of behavior transmitted through social learning (Baum, 2004; Glenn, 2004), then a case can certainly be made for the existence of different cultures in the classroom even 30 years ago. With increased physical and social mobility, however, even more opportunity exists today for the contingencies operating within different cultures to collide, to interact, and to modify one another. My Spanish-speaking students are reinforced by friends and family for using Spanish and are punished in subtle and not-so-subtle ways by the mainstream English-speaking culture for not conforming to linguistic norms.

The interplay between the values of dominant and minority cultures, expressed and taught through the contingencies of reinforcement in place in each culture, may well play a role in the success or failure of a variety of behavioral interventions. Fennick and Royle (2003), for example, described their efforts to create a recreation program for developmentally disabled children that did not succeed in reaching cultural minority families, due to flawed scheduling and outreach practices. In contrast, Mattaini (2004) described a program in which juvenile crime in the Maori population was reduced by using indigenous Maori practices in place of traditional courtroom procedures. Examples like these have led many branches of psychology to emphasize the need for professionals to develop "cultural competence" or, in behavioristspeak, skills or classes of behavior that facilitate work with diverse cultural groups. Behavior analysts, however, have not had much to say about the need for cultural competence. Following Skinner’s seminal works on culture (Walden 2, 1948; The Design of Cultures, 1961) much has been written about learning to create change within a culture (Glenn, 2004), but the reverse goals of understanding and analyzing interactions among and between individual and cultural contingencies have been left on a back burner.
Why is this the case? Perhaps it is because behavior analysts share an explicit assumption that the principles and procedures of behavior analysis are scientifically based, lawful and universal. They hold not just across groups of people, but across species, families and phyla. Religion, nationality, race and socio-economic class should have no bearing on the effectiveness of behavioral interventions. So why then should behavior analysts be concerned about “cultural competence” or “culturally appropriate interventions?” Why does it make sense to tailor an intervention for members of particular cultural groups?

The answer, of course, is that behavior does not occur in a vacuum. It occurs within the context of a social environment. Ecological theorists argue that there are a number of levels of the social environment, including the family, community, and the larger culture in which the individual behaves (Santarelli, Koegel, Casas, & Koegel, 2001). Each level of the social environment has its own contingencies of reinforcement that impact both the behavior of the individual and the behavior of the community as a whole. When there are multiple contingencies of reinforcement acting on an individual, these contingencies may conflict with one another. For an individual who is not of the dominant culture, there is a potential conflict between the contingencies of the traditional culture and those of the new culture in which the individual resides. To ensure the success of any behavioral intervention and to maximize the welfare of all participants, it is important to analyze the constellation of contingencies acting on the individual, including both the contingencies that effect the behavior of the communities to which the individual belongs and the contingencies acting directly upon the individual’s behavior. This is particularly critical with individuals from minority cultures functioning within the mainstream culture.

Researchers in special education and autism have highlighted many potential areas for cultural conflict (Rogers-Adkinson, D. L., Ochoa, T. A. and Delgado, B., 2003; Wilder, Dyches, Obiakor & Algozzine, 2004; Zionts & Zionts, 2003). One such area involved the reinforcement of behaviors that are not valued or reinforced within the home culture. For example, Susy, an Asian child is being taught to establish eye contact but at home eye contact is punished because it is considered disrespectful. Juan, who recently arrived from Puerto Rico, is being taught to express various words in English but in his home only Spanish is spoken. Val’s teachers are encouraging him to be more self-reliant. Val’s parents, however, who recently arrived from Mexico, feel it is their moral duty to care for his needs and do not reinforce his steps toward independence. The nature of the chosen reinforcer itself may differ across mainstream and minority cultures. While individual recognition serves to reinforce behavior in Western cultures that emphasize individualism, such recognition may serve as a punisher in cultures that emphasize collectivism.
Conflicts can proceed in the opposite direction as well, when behaviors seen as problematic by behavior analysts are reinforced (or not discouraged) in the home. Jim, a boy from a Navajo family, engages in hand flapping and other stereotyped behaviors. His family sees this as a sign that he possesses certain gifts, and attends to him when he engages in self-stimulation. Malik, an Indian girl, is excessively active and distractable. At home, her family ignores the disruptive behaviors that are discouraged by her teachers, because such behaviors are not seen as a problem in their culture (Rogers-Adkinson, D. L., Ochoa, T. A. and Delgado, B., 2003; Wilder, Dyches, Obiakor & Algozzine, 2004; Zionts & Zionts, 2003).

For behavior analysts, attention to competing cultural contingencies may help to identify the conditions that maintain (or fail to maintain) behaviors; to establish effective reinforcers or punishers for individual behavioral interventions; to identify antecedent stimuli and to choose appropriate target behaviors or methods of intervention. Forehand and Kotchick (1996) created a taxonomy of parenting practices among varying cultural groups for professionals involved in parent training. Although such a tool might be useful as we begin to think about these issues, it is likely that cultural contingencies shift too quickly for it to be useful for long. As competing contingencies interact and are modified by the larger social context, the behavior of individuals changes, and thus new cultural contingencies are created. For example, not too long ago, cell phone use in school was associated with drug trafficking and frowned upon by parents in mainstream middle-class American culture. Today, many parents require their children to carry cellphones and to keep in touch at frequent intervals. Continuous reflection on the multiple and potentially conflicting contingencies acting on the behavior of our clients, students, colleagues and neighbors may enhance our effectiveness at work and also facilitate civil and productive interactions throughout our lives.

And what of my four students who explored the differential effects of language on overheard conversations? Although the results of their study were inconclusive, the effect of including their observations served to educate the both me, the Instructor, and students of both majority and minority linguistic groups to the effect and possible impact of subtle cultural variables.

References


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