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LEAD ARTICLE

BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS OF PSYCHOTIC DISORDERS: SCIENTIFIC DEAD END OR CASUALTY OF THE MENTAL HEALTH POLITICAL ECONOMY?

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ABSTRACT: Behavior analysis, once a promising approach to understanding and treating severe mental disorders, has been obscured by the biomedical model of mental illness and its ubiquitous psychotropic drugs. The present paper gives a brief overview of behavioral research on psychotic disorders followed by a critical review of the prevailing biomedical model including psychiatric diagnoses, anti-psychotic medications, clinical outcomes, and adverse effects of drug treatment. This paper also examines ideological, political, and economic mechanisms of control that have blocked the application of behavior analysis with severe mental disorders.
KEYWORDS: behavioral treatment, chronic mental patients, schizophrenia, history of behavior analysis, biomedical model, professional competition, pharmaceutical industry

Behavior analysis once offered a bright promise for advancing the understanding and treatment of severe mental disorders. Half a century ago, landmark studies in the experimental and the applied analyses of behavior were being conducted with psychotic patients in the ill-fated state mental hospitals. B. F. Skinner and Ogden Lindsley first replicated the free-operant paradigm with humans using chronic mental patients as subjects (Rutherford, 2003). They constructed an apparatus in which patients could pull a lever to obtain candy, cigarettes, projected slide images, and other stimuli dispensed on variable-interval and fixed-ratio schedules of reinforcement. Cumulative recorders showed the variable-interval schedules produced stable response rates that varied across individual patients, and the fixed-ratio schedules produced the characteristic post-reinforcement pauses commonly seen with infrahuman organisms maintained on this schedule (Lindsley & Skinner, 1954; Skinner, Solomon, & Lindsley, 1954). These response patterns served as stable baselines against which patients' "psychotic episodes,"

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