

NOTES FROM A RADICAL BEHAVIORIST: IS IT MORALLY DEFENSIBLE TO USE THE DEVELOPMENTALLY DISABLED AS GUINEA PIGS?

Richard W. Malott¹
Western Michigan University

Others have argued that we can justify the developmentally disabled spending some of their time as research subjects by considering it part of the tuition they pay. And we might make the same argument for college sophomores in Introductory Psych when they serve as subjects; however, we are obligated to provide the sophomores with an educationally valuable debriefing, in return for their participation. But I don't think the developmentally disabled get such an exchange. And often the institution doesn't get any payoff either. Now I'm somewhat sympathetic with the problems of the basic researcher in this area; they may simply have nothing to offer the individual or the institution, and yet science must march on. But we might say that for every hour the developmentally disabled individual gives the researcher in the name of science, the researcher should give one hour to the individual in the name of one-on-one therapy or training. Even basic scientists can do that. And such a policy sure would encourage small- n^2 research.

But I'm really more concerned about applied researchers. They often have something of real value they could offer the developmentally disabled individual and the institution. But once the researcher has met the objective of achieving a thesis, a dissertation, or a submittable article, he or she is long gone, off to fresh new projects, leaving the subjects none the richer. For instance, a student will develop and validate some special training program for the developmentally disabled, and then close up shop as soon as enough multiple baselines have been run. The student graduates and moves off to a job at some other training center for the developmentally disabled, and that's that. *Après moi, le deluge.*

The same problem seems to prevail in most other areas of research as well. In instructional technology, we have a strong tendency to demonstrate a significant effect and then start packing our bags, with little concern about whether our new procedure remains in the system and is actually used. We sometimes treat our introductory psychology courses as if they were mainly to serve as a vehicle for publications rather than for educating our students. We are more concerned with

¹ Some content in Notes from a Radical Behaviorist has previously been published privately by the author. Materials have been updated for the current publication.

² Research with a small number of subjects (i.e., where the number of subjects, n , is small).

whether our article gets published than whether the course is permanently improved as a result of our research and development efforts.

Now the requirements of social validation and cost-benefit analyses for applied research go a long toward insuring the practicality of our developing technology. But they often fail to insure that technology's implementation and maintenance, once the original research is done.

So I think we need to add one more requirement for applied research to be acceptable for a thesis, dissertation, or publication. I think we should require evidence that the researcher has arranged for the results of that research to be implemented and maintained after the initial research is done. In other words, I think we should put a contingency on evidence of a social conscience. Some faculty hand out checklists for their grad students to help them do good research: *Do reliability checks; Do social validations, etc.* I think we should add to that checklist: *Have a social conscience. Don't short-change your subjects or your hosts.*

I think this problem often arises from the artificial contingencies put on the research effort in the first place. Most research seems to be done to help a student obtain a degree or a faculty member to get tenure. Most research does not seem to be done to solve a problem in the research setting. This condition might be improved slightly, if we supplemented the above implementation and maintenance requirement with a couple more.

We could require that students do one or two semesters of practicum in the setting prior to or in conjunction with their research. And we could require that the faculty member have some sort of vested, long-term interest in the research setting. These requirements might make it more reinforcing for the researchers to solve the real problems of their research setting, though the requirements will not guarantee problem-oriented research; and of course many times those requirements will not be practicable.

Please don't take my suggestions as a burning critique of our field. I think applied behavior analysis is the most moral and most accountable research field in psychology. I just think we are ready to advance to the next level of morality.