

## Social Learning Theory and Social Work Treatment

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### Social Learning

Based on the premise that much of our behavior is learned and changeable, knowledge of operant, respondent, and observational learning is used to beneficially modify client behavior through the use of tested, ethical procedures.

The purpose of the practice of social work is to change behavior. Whether one engages in clinical work with individuals, couples, families, small groups, or organizations, or provides supervision, administration, community organization, or policy practice, the eventual bottom line is to effectively change the behavior of people. Towards this end, our discipline has adopted or developed a plethora of approaches, some of which are firmly grounded in a well-crafted theoretical orientation, others less so. A very widely used approach to practice is known as *behavioral social work*, which has been defined as:

the informed use by professional social workers of assessments and interventions based on empirically derived learning theories. These theories include, but are not limited to, respondent learning, operant learning, and observational learning. Behavioral social workers may or may not subscribe to the philosophy of science known as behaviorism. (Thyer & Hudson, 1987, p. 1)

These learning theories were developed largely outside of social work but have been incorporated into our field almost from its inception. Box 31.1 includes some selected quotations dating back to the 1920s reflecting the positive contributions that the behavioral orientation was

**Box 31.1** Early Statements on the Importance of Behaviorism to Social Work

“Sooner or later, too, I believe, every conscientious physician, as every earnest educator, *social worker*, economist, sociologist, every attorney and judge, every artist and craftsman, every laborer for human welfare, every man or woman hurt or seeking to avoid being hurt, striving to understand intelligently themselves and their fellow creatures, must come to grips and to terms with its [behaviorism’s] strange doctrines that possess a power and a fascination.”

(Berman, 1927, pp. 26–27, emphasis added)

“Two dominant schools of thought may be recognized as differentiating case work approach and treatment at the present time; behaviorist psychology and psychiatric interpretation. The former emphasizes habit training, conditioning and reconditioning in treatment. . . . Illustrations of a partial use of this psychology in treatment are abundant in any case work area.”

(Robinson, 1930, pp. 83–84)

“Behaviorism may be described as the theory that learning is the association of a new impression with the circumstances present at the time of receiving it. It has several obvious merits. It integrates emotion and intellect in a manner which realistically reproduces actual experience. It is socially acceptable, in the main, as it places such large faith upon capacity to learn, given the right conditions for association . . . behaviorism affords a first-class technic, without specializing in the abnormal. . . . It is invaluable for the social worker in his efforts to understand the conduct of his clients, because it refers him back to the past experiences in which are to be found the particular circumstances which have determined the attitude or the habitual responses for each individual. Thus behaviorism opens up endless possibilities for social work. . . . It is also of value in treatment, for some of the most interesting work of the behaviorists has been in the field of what is called reconditioning.”

(Bruno, 1934, pp. 197–198)

“The time has now come to make a transition to a full scientific methodology in personality analysis and therapy. Behaviorism has attempted to understand the intricacies of personality and to work out a treatment technique based on this understanding. From the viewpoint of behaviorism, personality is the conditioned result of the infinite number of experiences that come with living in environments which become more complex as man makes them so. Both individual and environment are studied, because a realistic view of behavior makes this inevitable. Social workers should examine and understand this point of view, which offers a more comprehensive explanation of human motivation and its meaning than the mysticism of psychoanalysis.”

(Houwink, 1937, p. 202)

“. . . the socio-behavioral approach provides a viable and potentially durable framework within which to practice. Contained within it are important empirical bases lacking in many more traditional approaches.”

(Thomas, 1967, p. 15)

“. . . social learning theory holds a rather optimistic view of man’s ability to change his behavior. Since all behavior is malleable, and if the conditions maintaining behavior can be controlled, and the proper reinforcers found, then change is possible . . . the promise of social learning theory for the treatment field appears to be great.”

(Whittaker, 1974, pp. 86–87)

seen to have for social work practice. Discipline-specific reviews—those addressing a social work audience—of operant (Reid, 2004; Schwartz & Goldiamond, 1975; Wong, 2012), respondent (Thyer, 2012), and observational learning theories (Fischer & Gochros, 1975; Wodarski & Bagarozzi, 1979) help translate these principles into the unique aspects of what social workers do. As noted in the definition provided above, behavioral social work is a strongly theoretically

based orientation, and any social worker proposing to make use of behavioral methods should have a thorough grounding in the scientific theories underlying its approaches to assessment, intervention, and the evaluation of practice. Sundel and Sundel (2005) is one excellent general introduction to social learning theory focusing on a social work audience.

Behavioral social work can be seen as three related but distinguishable components: a

wide-ranging theory, numerous specific practice methods, and a comprehensive philosophy of science. It is important to keep these three elements distinct, because the merits and limitations of each should not be confused with the approach as a whole. For example, the philosophy of science called *behaviorism* is a well-developed approach to addressing the major elements that are the focus of philosophy, issues such as epistemology, ontology, language, free will versus determinism, values and ethics, etc. (see Thyer, 1999). However, one need not subscribe to the philosophy of behaviorism to make use of the interventive methods based upon social learning theory, and objections to the philosophy may have little bearing on the validity of the approach's underlying theory or practice utility. Similarly, one can subscribe to the principles of social learning theory yet not be a philosophical behaviorist. Or one can use behavior practice techniques even if one believes the underlying theory is incorrect. Individuals whose conceptual framework embraces all three elements—the theory, the practice methods, and the philosophy—generally call themselves “behavior analysts” or “radical behaviorists,” with “radical” meaning “complete” (not referring to political extremism).

However, most social workers who make use of behavioral methods do so as a part of a more eclectic approach to practice. A large-scale survey of clinical social workers conducted by Timberlake, Sabatino, and Martin (1997) found that 43% reported using behavioral methods “frequently.” A more recent survey (Pignotti & Thyer, 2009) of about 400 licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs) found that the most common theoretical *orientation* they reported using was cognitive-behavioral (42%), with psychodynamic theory the next most common (21%). Pignotti and Thyer (2009) previously found that, in terms of the most frequent *interventions* used during the past year, cognitive behavioral methods topped the list, being used by 73% of the LCSWs they surveyed. Conveniently, behavioral social work enjoys the strongest level of empirical support, in terms of outcome studies with positive results, of any approach to practice (Gorey, Thyer, & Pawluck, 1998; MacDonald, Sheldon, & Gillespie, 1992; Reid & Fortune, 2003; Reid & Hanrahan, 1982; Rubin, 1985).

## What Is Behavior?

In behavioral social work, as is true for behaviorism in general, “behavior” refers to what the person does. It makes no difference whether or not an outside observer can view what is occurring; if it is something a person is doing, it is behavior. I stress this point because behaviorism is commonly construed as focusing only on the overt actions of people and not on their inner, lived experiences. Given the importance of these latter elements in our lives (e.g., the love I feel for my family), if it is seen (erroneously) that behavioral methods ignore these issues, then the approach may be discarded as somehow incomplete or limited. Although it was the psychologist John B. Watson in the early part of the last century who claimed that the sole legitimate subject matter of psychology was overt behavior, this limitation was never really adhered to, and several decades later, B. F. Skinner asserted that the proper subject matter of behaviorism was both public behavior and our inner lives. It is in this sense that behavioral social work is currently interpreted, and this is reflected in the definition of behavior contained in *The Social Work Dictionary*: “Any action or response by an individual, including observable activity, measurable physiological changes, cognitive images, fantasies, and emotions” (Barker, 2014, p. 38).

Thus, the focus of behavioral social work is not only on changing overt behavior, but also on any private events experienced by clients as problematic. This would include attitudes (e.g., racism, see Arhin & Thyer, 2004; Lillis & Hayes, 2007; Hayes, Niccolls, Masuda, & Rye, 2002), fear, opinions, dreams, obsessions, anxiety, hallucinations, depression, delusions, etc., as well as an interest in enhancing positive inner qualities, such as self-esteem, optimism, and hope. Some of the earliest behavior therapies were focused on helping clients with affective problems such as severe anxiety, and they were found to be very helpful in this regard.

## What Is the Relationship Between Inner and Outer Behavior?

In much of lay and professional psychology, it is contended that our inner lives drive our outer

actions. For example, to eliminate racist actions, the first step often is said to be to change an individual's attitudes, since one's attitudes are said to cause one's actions. Or to alleviate the lethargic behavior, weeping, and expression of hopelessness associated with depression, it is claimed to be crucial to alleviate the inner state of depression (the feeling), and then the overt symptoms will improve. Behaviorism does not subscribe to the theory that attitudes (or other inner mental events) *cause* overt actions. Rather, the behaviorist puts forth the more credible hypothesis that both overt actions and attitudes (or feelings, opinions, etc.) are similarly brought about largely by one's learning history. How one has experienced reinforcement and punishment for past actions helps shape both future overt activity and our inner lives related to those activities. Therefore, to change attitudes and behavior, one will probably need to experience changes in the reinforcers and punishers one is exposed to.

Social worker Harris Chaiklin (2011) has prepared an overview on research on the relationships between attitudes and behavior, and contends that our disciplinary preoccupation with changing attitudes in order to bring about changes in comportment is unsupported by the available scientific research. Chaiklin concludes, "It is not necessary to change attitudes to change behavior" (p. 31). Are attitudes and feelings important in a behavioral analysis? Very much so. However, they are not seen as causal; they are more behaviors to be explained.

### Basic Propositions of Behavioral Social Work

Behavioral social work is based on a limited number of deceptively simple but fundamental propositions (Fischer & Gochros, 1975). These include the following:

1. Human behavior consists of what we do—both observable behavior and unobservable behavior: overt acts, covert speech, thoughts and cognition, feelings, and dreams. All those phenomena that people engage in are considered behavior.
2. To a large extent, much (but not all) of human behavior is learned through life

experiences. This learning occurs throughout the lifespan.

3. It seems very likely that similar fundamental learning processes give rise to individual human behavior across cultures and life circumstances and account for both normative and many so-called dysfunctional actions, feelings, and thoughts.
4. Interpersonal behavior is also a function (to some extent) of these learning processes, giving rise to dyadic, group, organizational, community, and societal phenomena. These larger-scale activities are, to a great extent, a more complex operation of fundamental learning mechanisms.
5. There are at least three major empirically supported learning processes that collectively make up social learning theory: respondent learning, operant learning, and observational learning.
6. To the degree that the learning processes responsible for developing and maintaining behavior can be identified and altered, it may be possible to effectively change behavior toward desired ends.

Each of the above propositions is well supported and difficult to argue against, particularly given the qualifiers used (e.g., "to some extent," "but not all"). This is not persiflage. Behaviorists recognize the importance of other factors giving rise to human activity, factors such as one's genetic endowment, life *in utero*, and other biological factors such as health, disease states, exposure to toxins, radiation, pollution, etc. Our lived environments are both physical and behavioral, and consist in part of the extent to which our actions result in various consequences. Behaviorists make no claim that their orientation provides a sufficient accounting to explain *all* human activity. Theirs is the more modest claim that the factors they focus on are very likely to be salient in most situations and deserve careful consideration as to their potential role in a given circumstance.

### Learning Theory

The three major learning processes that behavioral social work is based upon are called operant learning, respondent learning, and

observational learning. Each of these will be briefly reviewed.

### Operant Learning

This type of learning is simplistically defined as “A type of learning defined by B. F. Skinner (1904–1990) in which behaviors are strengthened or weakened by altering the consequences that following them” (Barker, 2003, p. 306). It is called *operant learning* because it refers to the extent to which the behavior “operates” on the environment, which in turn produces consequences for the behaving person. Consequences that strengthen subsequent behavior are called *reinforcers*. If a stimulus is presented, and behavior is later strengthened, this stimulus (colloquially, something good) is called a *positive reinforcer*. If a stimulus is removed, and behavior is later strengthened, this stimulus is called a *negative reinforcer* (think of the term *relief*). The corresponding processes are called positive and negative reinforcement, respectively. Consequences that have the effect of weakening behavior are called *punishers*. If a stimulus follows a behavior and that behavior later is subsequently weakened, this type of consequence is called *punishment*. If the consequence involves the presentation of a stimulus (something bad), the stimulus is called a *positive punisher*, and a stimulus that, if removed (something good), subsequently weakens behavior is called a *negative punisher* (think of being fined). The corresponding operations are called positive and negative punishment. Any behavior that produces consequences is liable to be affected, either strengthened or weakened, by those consequences.

Other operant processes include that of *extinction*, which occurs when the consequences that are maintaining a given behavior are discontinued, and the behavior subsequently weakens. *Shaping* occurs when “new patterns of behavior are fashioned by reinforcing progressively closer approximations of the desired behaviors and not reinforcing others” (Barker, 2003, p. 395). In this way, simple actions (hitting a piano key) can be systematically refined to yield more complex activities (e.g., playing a sonata). Operant processes are crucially involved in much of human learning, in both normal development across the lifespan (Bijou,

1993; Schlinger, 1995), as well as in the etiology of so-called abnormal behavior and psychosocial problems. Contingencies of reinforcement affect, not only individuals, but also the functioning of larger groups of people, including organizations, communities, and society as a whole. The entire field of social welfare policy can be construed as the governmental imposition of artificial contingencies of punishment (usually) and reinforcement (less often) related to behaviors that politicians deem important to change (Thyer, 1996).

Here are some everyday examples to make these processes a bit clearer. You insert coins in a soda machine and a few moments later receive a can of cold soda. The act of putting the coins in the machine was positively reinforced: positively (because something was presented), and reinforced because you are more likely to do the same actions in a similar situation. Drinking the soda refreshes your thirst. The act of drinking is negatively reinforcing: negatively because something aversive was taken away (thirst), reinforced because you are more likely to drink that beverage in the future (as opposed to chugging down highly salted water). During dinner, you reach across your mother to grab the salt. Your elderly mother slaps your hand, saying “Mind your manners.” In the future, you are less likely to reach across your mother. This is positive punishment: positive because something unpleasant was presented contingent on your behavior, and punishment because this behavior is weakened (at least around Mom). You are speeding home from class. You are stopped by the police for speeding and have to pay a substantial fine. In the future, you speed less (for a while, at least). Speeding has been negatively punished: negatively because something pleasant or desirable was taken away, and punished because the behavior in question is weakened. Keep in mind that negative reinforcement and punishment are not synonymous. The former always strengthens behavior and the latter weakens it. We usually like to be negatively reinforced (think of relief), and we dislike being punished.

### Respondent Learning

Another fundamental way in which people learn is via respondent conditioning, also

known as *Pavlovian conditioning*. Respondent learning is quite distinct from operant learning, although it is common (and a mistake) for the two approaches not to be separated. Most social workers will have learned something of the fundamentals of respondent learning, which occurs when a neutral stimulus is paired with a unconditioned stimulus (UCS), something that automatically elicits a simple, reflexive form of behavior. Some example of UCSs in everyday life include sharp pain and loud noises, each of which usually causes the listener to flinch or withdraw quickly. If some neutral stimulus occurs just before a UCS, after one such (or several) pairing(s), the previously neutral stimulus can come to evoke a similar reaction. Many readers will have fearful reactions to the sound of the dentist's drill, a reaction that is a conditioned response to the sound of the previously neutral noise of the drill, because in the reader's past, the drill sounds immediately preceded a sharp pain. After only a few such experiences, the sound of the drill alone may be sufficient to make one flinch, to feel fearful, or to have an elevated heart rate. A more complex example occurs when cancer patients initially receive chemotherapy, medications with toxic effects often administered in clinic settings via an intravenous drip. The clinic surroundings and the IV apparatus are initially neutral stimuli. After one or more episodes when the medication is administered (neutral stimuli), the person may experience nausea and vomiting as a side effect of the medication. Soon, many chemotherapy patients come to experience nausea and even vomiting upon entering the clinic environs. The medication is a UCS; the naturally occurring nauseating side effects are unconditioned responses. The neutral clinic setting becomes a conditioned stimulus (CS) resulting in anticipatory nausea (a conditioned response) even before the medication is administered.

There are many subtle variations of natural and contrived respondent learning processes, including *respondent extinction*, wherein a conditioned stimulus is repeatedly presented, absent the UCS, so that the conditioned response is gradually weakened. One need not personally experience respondent learning processes in order to be affected by it; observing others is another way, known as *vicarious conditioning*.

Few of us have personally been attacked by a vampire, but if we saw a fanged Bela Lugosi outside our window, most of us would be seriously frightened. Why? None of us have been injured by a vampire, but we have certainly seen plenty of movie depictions of people being killed by them. This is vicarious respondent learning. *Higher-order respondent conditioning* occurs when a neutral stimulus immediately precedes an established CS (or CS<sub>1</sub>). In this way, the neutral stimulus can come to evoke reactions similar to those elicited by the original CS, leading to the development of a CS<sub>2</sub>, then perhaps a CS<sub>3</sub>, and so forth. By the time one has developed a CS<sub>n</sub><sup>th</sup>, the links may be so subtle as to elude discovery, leading to conditioned reactions that seem inexplicable or nonsensical.

Respondent learning is responsible for many of our emotional reactions and is implicated in the establishment of emotions and attitudes. It is intimately involved in much of normal human development as well as in the emergence of problematic behavior such as anxiety disorders. Many therapeutic approaches make use of respondent learning principles, and one of the earliest books on this topic appeared in 1949, a text called *Conditioned Reflex Therapy* (Salter, 1949). Thyer (2012) provides a good overview of the application of respondent learning principles to social work theory and practice.

### Observational Learning

Observational learning is also known as *modeling*, defined as "a form of learning in which an individual acquires behaviors by imitating the actions of one or more other people" (Barker, 2003, p. 276). Much behavior acquired by operant learning can also be acquired by observation. Observing others can help one develop an entirely new behavior, may inhibit certain activities, or may have the effect of reducing any reluctance to try something. For example, at an amusement park, I was recently confronted with a terrifying roller coaster my kids wanted me to ride with them. I was able to calm myself to the point of getting on and riding the thing by observing the reactions of the prior riders as they coasted to a halt at the end of their ride. Most were laughing and happy. This relieved my anxiousness (somewhat!).

Although one need not receive immediate reinforcement for imitating the successful behavior of others, this does not mean that observational learning is unrelated to reinforcement. In fact, modeled behavior that is never subsequently reinforced will probably undergo operant extinction. It is more likely that the capacity to acquire new behavior by observing others is another form of learning present from infancy throughout one's life, but that to the extent that modeled behavior is followed by reinforcement, even sporadically, we develop a strengthened repertoire for imitating others. Simply put, if you do as Mommy demonstrates and the new behavior is immediately reinforced by naturally occurring consequences, two things in reality get strengthened: the first is the modeled behavior directly, and the second is the likelihood of imitating Mommy (and then, of course, others). With many repetitions of this process, first perhaps with parents, then siblings, others family members or caregivers, and ultimately strangers, the human being develops a strong generalized capacity for imitation. This is a highly efficient form of learning that shortcuts the need to directly and immediately experience the effects of contingency shaping. Baer and Deguchi (1985) provide a very good exposition of how modeling may well be a highly developed form of operant learning. Fischer and Gochros (1975, pp. 101–102) provide a list of conditions that appear to facilitate learning via modeling, including, among others:

- Use models who are important to the observer.
- Show the model being reinforced.
- Reinforce the observer for imitating the model's behavior.
- Use multiple models.
- Use repeated modeling experiences.
- Graduate practice exercises (from less to more difficult).
- Arrange for reinforcement from the natural environment as soon as possible, etc.

These three learning theories have been combined to develop a viable alternative to the traditional stage-based theories of human development across the lifespan (see Bijou, 1993; Schlinger, 1995), a perspective that remains

oddly excluded from most social work textbooks on human development in the social environment. Similarly ignored are behavioral perspectives on what has been labeled "personality theory" (Lundin, 1974; Staats, 2003). This is difficult to fathom, since social work theorists of every persuasion are in accord that these principles are to some degree valid and important. The processes of operant, respondent, and observational learning are well supported in terms of empirical research as to their legitimacy, and they have led to the development of some very effective methods of interpersonal helping.

### **Learning Theory and the Person-in-Environment Perspective of Social Work**

If social work has anything akin to a unique perspective that distinguishes it from related human service disciplines, it is said to be the person-in-environment (PIE) point of view. Here are some representative quotes illustrating the perceived centrality of this perspective:

- "Behavior is the result of the effort of the person to establish himself in his environment in such a way as to give satisfaction to himself." (Bruno, 1934, p. 45)
- "Flexibility, change, and movement are of the very nature of social interaction. It is no wonder that social workers give close attention to behavior, which is the pulse of the human organism's attempts at adaptation." (Hamilton, 1940, p. 305)
- "A basic assumption . . . is that human behavior is the product of the interactions between the individual and his environment." (Northen, 1982, p. 63)
- "The human being and the environment reciprocally shape each other. People mold their environments in many ways and, in turn, they must then adapt to the changes they created." (Germain, in Bloom, 1992, p. 407)
- "The ecosystems perspective is about building more supportive, helpful and nurturing environments for clients through environmental helping, and increasing their competence in dealing with the environment by teaching

- basic life skills.” (Whittaker & Garbarino, 1983, p. 34)
- “The ecological perspective makes clear the need to view people and environments as a unitary system within a particular cultural and historic context. Both person and environment can be fully understood in terms of their relationship, in which each continually influences the other within a particular context. . . . Ecological thinking examines exchanges between A and B, for example, that shape, influence, or change both over time. A acts, which leads to a change in B, whereupon the change in B elicits a change in A that in turn changes B, which then changes or otherwise influences A, and so on.” (Germain & Gitterman, 1995, p. 816)
  - “Person-in-environment perspective . . . [is] an orientation that views the client as part of an environmental system. This perspective encompasses the reciprocal relationships and other influences between an individual, the *relevant other* or others, and the physical and social environment.” (Barker, 2003, p. 323, emphasis in original)

Here are some selected quotes illustrating how this same perspective is central to social learning theory and behavioral analysis and therapy:

- “Men act upon the world and change it, and are changed in turn by the consequences of their action. Certain processes which the human organism shares with other species, alter behavior so that it achieves a safer and more useful interchange with a particular environment. When appropriate behavior has been established, its consequences work through similar processes to keep it in force. If by chance the environment changes, new forms of behavior disappear, while new consequences build new forms.” (Skinner, 1957, p. 1)
- “Most behavioral science emphasizes the power of the environment; it sees environment as constantly controlling behavior, and it sees behavior as constantly affecting the environment. Indeed, the point of most behavior is to affect the environment.” (Baer & Pinkston, 1997, p. 1)

- “Behaviorism’s environmentalism does not imply that the organism passively reacts to the environment. The relationship between the organism and the environment is interdependent and reciprocal. . . . That is, although the organism interacts with its environment, its reaction also changes the environment. The organism is then influenced by an environment changed by its own behavior, behaves again, changes the environment again, and so on. Thus the organism’s relationship to its environment is one of mutual influence.” (O’Donohue & Ferguson, 2001, p. 57)
- “Behavior analysis is essentially the study, definition, and characterization of effective environments as arrayed over time, with ‘effective’ defined by the dynamics of behavior. . . . Psychological process is construed as behavior–environment interaction. It does not consist in phenomena that underlie that interaction.” (Hineline, 1990, p. 305)

The apparent congruence between social work’s PIE and behavior is both obvious and compelling. Behavioral approaches are a largely environmentally based perspective on understanding, predicting, and controlling human behavior, as opposed to the mentally oriented theories common to most other approaches to social work. An example of this behavioral perspective on PIE is called *functional analysis*, and an illustration of this process was narratively described by one social worker over 40 years ago:

During the initial phases of a project integrating orthopedically handicapped children into groups of nonhandicapped children, no specific instructions were given to the group leaders regarding the degree of “special attention” they were to provide the handicapped children. After a few sessions, it was noticed that one leader appeared especially overprotective: Every time the handicapped child approached this leader, he was treated with excessive warmth and openness. At the direction of his supervisor, the leader observed the results of this interaction carefully. It became apparent that the leader was, in effect, rewarding passive, dependent behavior and that this was detrimental to the integrative attempts. On the basis of this observation, the leader predicted that if he were to respond more critically to this behavior, that is, to redirect the handicapped child whenever feasible and realistic, the child would become less

passive and more independent and would interact more with his peers (at this point, a hypothesis has been developed and a “prediction” made where-with to test the hypothesis). The leader adopted this approach, and his prediction was borne out, namely, that a more objective response did affect the specific elements of behavior under consideration in a desirable fashion. (Holmes, 1967, pp. 95–96)

In effect, when a target behavior is identified, the social worker observes the client in his or her natural environment to ascertain the antecedent circumstances and consequences surrounding this behavior. From these qualitative observations, specific hypotheses are generated regarding potential etiological and maintaining contingencies. These hypotheses are then tested by deliberately changing the presumptive causal consequences via environmental manipulation. If the behavior reliably changes as the consequences are changed, then one has, in effect, isolated at least some of the variables causally responsible for the behavior in question. One is thus examining the functions that the behavior has for the individual concerned—hence the term “functional analysis.”

### Ethical Issues

Behavioral approaches represent perhaps one of the most ethical approaches to the delivery of the human services compared to other theoretical orientations. This is because they enjoy a generally sound empirical foundation and are thus consistent with our ethical standards that mandate social workers base their practice, in part, on empirical research. Indeed, it can be reasonably contended that clients have a right to be offered effective interventions—that is, those supported by sound outcome studies yielding positive results with individuals who are similar to one’s client, and who experienced similar problems (Myers & Thyer, 1997). Like all approaches to social work intervention, behavioral methods are governed by our professional codes of ethics and legal regulations. Clients can be abused by all forms of therapy, and no approach is exempt from this potential for misuse. Social workers attempting to make use of behavioral methods should do so with a sound understanding of social learning theory so that these approaches are applied in an

informed and professional manner, and not as a rote technical skill. Social workers choosing to focus their professional life through providing behavior analysis and therapy may wish to join any of a number of behaviorally oriented professional organizations, such as the Association for Behavior Analysis (<http://www.abainternational.org/>), for professional development, training, and continuing education. Many states offer an advanced practice credential called “Board Certified Behavior Analyst” (see <http://www.bacb.com/>) that clinical social workers may qualify for. This is a credential that can be earned in addition to, or in lieu of, licensure as a clinical social worker.

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