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Trends. U.S. Foreign Policy and the People's Republic of China: A Behaviorist Perspective

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(Re-posted from November 8, 1998 [IBPP, Vol. 1, No. 2] in the context of the most current controversies in United States (US)-People's Republic of China (PRC) relations--viz., alleged harm to U.S. security from export of U.S. satellite technology and missile technology exports to the PRC; alleged PRC theft of a U.S. satellite reorienting control board; alleged and illegal PRC financial contributions to the U.S. Democratic Party during the 1996 U.S. Presidential elections; alleged quid pro quo of PRC money for changes in U.S. policies towards approving technology exports and balancing political, security, and economic interests; and U.S. Congressional and international human rights pressures to attenuate U.S. policies of engagement with the PRC and induce more severe U.S. sanctions towards the PRC.)

The 27-year-old political dissident Wang Dan has been sentenced to 11 years in prison for plotting to subvert the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) through his writings and through his association with other internal dissidents and various foreign nationals. To many international correspondents and pundits, this represents but another disaster in what they term the tragedy that is U.S. foreign policy towards the PRC. [Wang Dan has since been released and is in the US]. Be it (1) human and civil rights; (2) the proliferation of weapons or related components, technology, and information; (3) the U.S. trade deficit with the Chinese based at least partially on Chinese prison labor and Chinese military controls and subsidies; (4) Chinese imperialist and hegemonic designs on Asia and the Pacific; (5) tenuous Chinese policies on nuclear weapons and weapons-related testing; (6) ambivalence towards being a constructive interlocutor with the North Korean government; (7) the rule of law, or (8) Taiwan and the upcoming reversion of Hong Kong to the PRC, the U.S. seems to have--with very few exceptions--failed to achieve stated objectives.

A case can be made that there is much in common with these foreign policy failures and therapeutic failures in behaviorist-oriented psychotherapy. Both foreign policy and therapy are intended to influence people towards specific, behavioral objectives. And both are based on the ultimate premise that the judicious threat or application of sanctions--positive and negative--effect this influence. Therefore, commonalties should not be surprising. Unfortunately, neither should their frequently shared failure.

Both foreign policy and behaviorist therapy employ four main techniques of influence: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, omission training, and punishment. These techniques are intended to increase, decrease, or maintain the frequency and/or intensity of some behavior. In positive reinforcement the initiator of the influence technique intends to increase the probability that a target will manifest a particular behavior in a particular situation. The technique is assumed by the initiator to "work" by providing something to the target that will indeed have this consequence. This "something" often is assumed by the initiator to be pleasurable, pleasing, or satisfying to the target. In negative reinforcement the same consequence occurs through removing something from the target. This something is assumed by the initiator to be noxious, painful, or need-intensifying, not need-satisfying to the target. In omission training the initiator intends to decrease the probability that a target will manifest a particular behavior in a particular situation. The technique is assumed to "work" by removing

something from the target that will indeed have this consequence. This "something" often is assumed by the initiator to have the same properties as the "something" in positive reinforcement. In punishment the same consequence occurs through providing "something" which has the same properties as the something in negative reinforcement.

As the discerning reader has no doubt already surmised, the above definitions are a hopeless, conceptual muddle. For starters, they are circular. One positively reinforces someone by providing something that positively reinforces someone. In addition, the behaviorist jargon poorly hides the intrapsychic assumptions inherent in this very jargon, which proudly belies the need for intrapsychic assumptions. For example, the initiator admittedly intends to influence someone and perceive the consequences of the influence attempt. Yet the target's intentions and perceptions are deemed to be irrelevant, nonexistent, or marching lockstep in a simplistic, congruent fashion with the intended behavioral goal. And how can one know in advance what is pleasurable or noxious enough to the target to cause a behavioral change without mining the target's perceptions? One can't look at the target's previous behavioral track record because often the behavioral change to be elicited has never or seldom ever occurred.

What is worse, there are at least five significant areas of psychological research which contradict the assertions of the behaviorists, even assuming the above conceptual problems could be satisfactorily handled. According to the reactance literature, people often react differently, even paradoxically, to what is expected of them because of their very knowledge that someone is trying to influence them or predict their behavior. According to the intrinsic reinforcement literature, positive reinforcement may actually decrease the probability of a specific behavior because a person has been given something intended to be pleasurable for performing a behavior that already yields internal satisfactions and meanings. According to the fixed action pattern literature, people will engage in some behaviors when elicited by certain stimuli regardless of attempts to influence them-- unless the stimulus in question can be modified-- but even this brings with it additional problems. According to the preparedness and instinctive drift literatures, certain behaviors, even if not desired by the initiator, may be much more easily influenced than others may, and so-called "natural behaviors" may intrude during an influence attempt, utterly preventing the behavioral change desired by the initiator. And according to the punishment literature, punishment's direct and indirect consequences often are extremely unpredictable, especially through time.

There are yet other difficulties. Both foreign policy operator and behaviorist therapist often focus totally or largely on a particular behavior to the exclusion of other behaviors that may have significant impact on the initiator's interests. Or both may actually evaluate the effects on other particular behaviors as well, but largely ignore or discount the consequences of a resulting, new pattern of target behaviors or the behaviors of observers or others who may be affected in new ways by these consequences.

Those alarmed at the brave new world about to be created by purveyors of behaviorist technology can rest easy. Most behavioral technologists promise much more than they can deliver. However, the most fanatic ideologues of any stripe, behaviorist or otherwise-- all those who rigidly and totally attempt to make the world fit their theories of how the world is as opposed to how it should be-- often spell disaster.

In conclusion, those who already are asking this generation's version of "Who lost China?" might better ask whether China is even there to win, lose or draw. And those who seek to keep aerospace corporations from forging business agreements with the PRC might ask once again, "To what purpose?"

(See Breland, K., & Breland, M. (1961.) Misbehavior of organisms. *American Psychologist*, 16, 681-684;
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(Eds.) (1995.) *Theories of behavior therapy: Exploring behavior change*. Washington, D.C.: American
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