



Applied behaviourism: implications

This activity will help you to...

- Understand how behaviourist principles have been applied in real-world settings.
- Consider the practical and ethical implications of using operant conditioning to shape human behaviour.

A technology of behavioural control?

In the mid 20th Century it was common for people with severe psychiatric problems to spend long periods (often years) in hospital. The hospitals were often fairly grim places whose primary aim was containment, rather than cure. Patients would spend long periods left to their own devices with very little to stimulate them. Contact with staff was fairly limited and mainly consisted of patients being told when to get up, where to go, when to eat, when to go to bed and so on. One consequence of this state of affairs was **institutionalisation**. In addition to their psychiatric problems, patients seemed to lose the ability to direct their own activities and needed to be told to do the most basic of things, like getting dressed and washing themselves.

Psychologists such as Allyn & Azrin (1968) realized that institutionalised patients had little chance of coping if they were released from hospital and created a way of using behaviourist principles to rehabilitate them. In their **token economy** programme, hospital managers would draw up a list of desirable behaviours they wanted to promote in their patients. Any patient who displayed these behaviours (e.g. getting dressed unprompted, talking coherently with others) would be given a token (a piece of card or plastic). Tokens could then be exchanged for things the patients valued including drinks, cigarettes, chocolate, trips out of the hospital and increased freedoms. Tokens could also be taken away if a patient behaved in undesirable ways.

- 'The token economy programme involves the use of primary and secondary reinforcers to shape behaviour.' Explain this statement.
- Treatment for psychological disorders is, in principle, voluntary and the goals of treatment should be set by the patient/client. If we accept this view, why might token economies be regarded as unethical? Do you agree that they are?
- Psychologists in the United States introduced token economies in some prisons in an attempt to rehabilitate offenders. Do you think we should use behaviourist principles to change the behaviour of offenders? Why (not)?
- Prison based token economies were abandoned after the US courts ruled that token economies violated the rights of offenders. However, many schools operate merit programmes similar in approach to token economies. What might be the arguments for and against this?

In some of his books (e.g. 'Beyond Freedom and Dignity', 'Walden Two') **Burrhus F. Skinner** argued that operant conditioning should be used to control the behaviour of our entire society. Skinner regarded the idea that people are autonomous beings with the right (and, indeed, ability) to choose their own behaviour as an unscientific fiction. His view was that the planned use of operant techniques to shape human behaviour would result in a happier and better-organised society.

- To what extent do you agree with this outlook?