
To the Editor

Carrot, stick and prisoner

Your article, "The carrot, the stick and the prisoner" (SN: 3/16/74, p. 181), skirts some very dangerous and depraved concepts. Who knows really who is devilish and who angelic? The jailers and behavior modifiers might turn out to be more in need of modifying than the prisoners. What is under consideration is the destruction of personality to make prisoners (or social or political dissidents) easier to manage, a sort of muffled form of murder.

Hugh W. Chaffin
Freeville, N.Y.

It is difficult to believe that psychology professor James McConnell is not talking tongue-in-cheek when he says: "Today's behavioral psychologists are the architects and engineers of the Brave New World. . . ."

Surely even a behaviorist is not so naive as not to realize that Huxley was pulling our leg with that title (as, indeed, Shakespeare might have been doing when he wrote the words). Huxley's Brave New World is neither brave, nor new, nor much of a world.

Or are we already in the grip of a race of technocrats who have it in mind to manage our behavior as if we were a population of chickens never to be touched by human hand? Or pigeons.

Gilbert S. Aberg
State College, Pa.

The conflict about operating prisons on a conservative versus a liberal basis leaves little room for the need to provide a fair place to segregate the criminal from society. In such a fair place there is room for a voluntary response in a setting that must be basically involuntary. This will leave room for the prisoner to exercise one of the several options such as paying his debt to society by fighting fires, engaging in therapy, doing his time or entering a behavior-modification program. We do need to be careful, though, to avoid the self-serving evaluations of behavior-modification advocates and their wild claims about what they can do if and when. When the president of the American Psychological Association thinks the behavior-modification process is misunderstood by the public, we might also consider that the public actually understands it. Particularly the propensity to introduce cruelties under the aegis of "therapeutic benefit." Or if not benefit at least well meaning intent. At least James McConnell appears to understand it as marked by his tongue-in-cheek statement about curing the social neurosis of the criminal.

R. H. Isaac
Pasadena, Calif.

James McConnell is quoted as saying: "We should reshape our society so that we all would be trained from birth to do what society wants us to do." But who is "society"? It is merely other people. In short, he wants to give some people the power and right to manipulate the minds and personalities of others—an extremely dangerous and evil policy. Indeed, good social changes will never come about if the people who do not fit in are forced to adapt to whatever conditions those in power support.

Janet Smarr
Austin, Tex.

Your article concerning the use of behavior modification in prisons raises many interesting points concerning the controversy, but does not deal with what I believe to be one of the most crucial issues in the matter. Prisons (and prison keepers) have always had available to them the basic tools of behavior modification: reward and punishment. Such things as extra privileges, special jobs, early parole, trusteeships, as well as solitary confinement, extra duties, and various forms of harrassments have long been used in prisons to reach certain goals as defined by the people in charge. However, these tools have usually been used haphazardly and sometimes for malicious or perverted ends.

Behavior modification attempts to analyze and systematize the rewards and punishments along with the available contingencies of behavior. By doing this, the effects of these kinds of interventions can be more accurately determined and decisions about what means to use can be made more effectively than previously. Obviously, behavior modification can be misused just as earlier rewards and punishments have been. However, a system which involves the prisoner, prison keeper and others in the detailed planning of an explicit treatment program would seem to me to be a laudable goal. The criticism that behavior modification represents some sort of brand new or alien tool for prisons is ludicrous.

Edward Rosenbaum, Ph.D.
Madison, Wisc.

Albert Bandura's remarks in the article really annoyed me, to express my feelings extremely mildly! They seem to me naive "liberal" ivory-tower type rhetoric, the sort which has to be at least partially responsible for the fact that mere law-abiding society-conforming citizens feel increasingly reluctant to walk the streets at night—or even, in some areas, during the day. To my knowledge, no one in this country is put in prison for being "black . . . and opposed to the political and social system in this country." If one chooses to act out these persuasions by mugging an innocent pedestrian, killing a cop, etc., one is often not even incarcerated, due to phony technicalities in the courts.

In addition, as for "being locked up" being "sufficient punishment," what about

the penal system's function of trying to return to society, at the end of their period of confinement, individuals who are less, rather than more, likely to commit crimes again?

In conclusion, I am neither stupid, reactionary, anti-minority group, nor uneducated. But I am increasingly disgusted by too much concern for the "rights of criminals" and too little concerned for the rights of law-abiding citizens to live in a peaceful, safe community.

Lois Ann Horowitz
Fair Lawn, N.J.

Straight society

What on earth is "optimistic" in Glenn T. Seaborg's forecast of a "highly disciplined, 'straight society,'" in which all deviation not in line with that picture is suppressed or rejected (SN: 3/9/74, p. 156). The whole picture sounds like a worldwide religious order. Life in a religious order can, I suppose, be very beautiful for some, and the orders have played a valuable role in history; but to have everybody belonging? Nix. (I'm age 83, in case you're interested.)

Alice Moore
Nevada City, Calif.

Priorities and development

The article on aid to the underdeveloped nations of the world (SN: 3/16/74, p. 175) is very informative, and shows the need for more economic development programs in many African and Asian nations. As the article states, very few corporations are interested, and it seems evident to me, at least, that the responsibility should rest with the Government.

However, it is difficult to see how the Government can implement these programs when such a small portion of the Federal budget is available for funding them. The military receives a relatively huge chunk of this budget and several billions are unwisely invested in the research and development of nuclear weapons.

If we would spend less time and money playing around with Minuteman and Trident, and use American abilities elsewhere, we might be able to help nations like Kenya in solving their economic problems.

Jerry Liebelson
Spring Valley, N.Y.

Science and the coach

A statement of concern for the future of science education (SN: 3/2/74, p. 136) should include an analysis of the relationship of high-school athletics and academics. As long as administrators are forced to, or voluntarily ("I don't care what kind of teacher I get, but he better be a good coach.") hire science teachers with minimal preparation and interest to fill coaching vacancies, science education is going to suffer.

Vaughn K. Folkman
Baker, Ore.