

FEATURES

Behavior mod: Euphemism for a kind of psychogenocide

By DAVID WEINBERG

"IT'S LIKE THEY'RE always watching you." He gestures to windows in the roof of his cell where guards can observe him. "Or they're listening to you." He indicates the speaker on the wall.

"Always judging how you're behaving. Always telling you . . ." his voice trails off. He looks at the floor in his cell thinking of what else to say. It is dinner hour at the prison, and a cart staffed by ten men begins moving slowly down the wing. One of the servers silently gestures to the prisoner with an antiseptic, plastic-gloved hand. All but one of the prisoners accept the stew and boiled potatoes served through a rectangular slot in the cell's bars.

The prisoner continues, placing his food aside momentarily. "One thing you don't realize about the place is once you're in, you're in for good. There's no way out of here except through the program."

IT'S NOT THE TYPE of thing they're talking about at cocktail parties anymore.

It had its fling in the newspapers. For a while it triggered the public's imagination. Then behavior modification went the way of most 'vogue' topics in this country — fading like the ephemeral image on a television screen.

For an involved few, it is a topic that has never lost its impact on society. To some its unbeatable method of personal problem solving. For others it symbolizes psychogenocide — the ultimate control of human behavior.

In the deepening silence surrounding it, behavior modification has moved quietly into the prison system, schools and one-on-one therapy. The initial furor has dissipated, but the behavior modification story and its problems remain — harbingers of a new technology and a new age.

LOCAL BEHAVIORIST James McConnell once said to a group of lawyers that "The day has come when we can combine sensory deprivation with the use of drugs, hypnosis and the astute manipulation of reward and punishment to gain almost absolute control over an individual's behavior . . . I foresee the day when we could take the worst criminal and convert him into a decent respectable citizen in a matter of months—or even less time than that."

McConnell said earlier this year



Daily Photo by KEN FINK

"No one insists that a physicist fall in love with electrons and treat them nicely and humanely," McConnell once said. "They are free to be objective about the things they study. The behaviorist asks no less than this. That is, he deals with people as 'objects to be studied' and perhaps to be manipulated."

that this statement was "blown totally out of proportion. The fact was, I was talking to a group of lawyers who were doubting that people could ever be changed. I wanted to reassure them that prisoners could be changed as people."

Behavior mod does have its positive uses, but it is in the omnipotent mentality which produced McConnell's statement that the controversy lies. There is something compelling about—a manipulative power under a scientific cover.

SINCE THE TURN OF the century, and particularly since WWII and B. F. Skinner, the application of behavior modification — B. Mod, B.M., Behavior Mod, whatever the moniker — has expanded enormously. Proponents of the theory insist on examining people "objectively," dealing with their behavior. They do not focus on motivations or intentions, but on observable behavior. Some behaviorists even speak of their patients in techno-scientific jargon.

"No one insists that a physicist

fall in love with electrons and treat them nicely and humanely," McConnell once said. "Nor do we insist that a chemist be particularly nice to each oxygen molecule. They are free to be objective about the things they study."

Behaviorists ask no less than this. They deal with people as 'objects to be studied' and perhaps to be manipulated.

PROBABLY THE MOST ideal environment for the study of human manipulation is a closed one, a controlled institution where 'participants' could be compared with laboratory animals. A prison.

When you cross the Mackinac Bridge, you're about half way to the Michigan Intensive Program Center (MIPC) in Marquette. From then on the road to Marquette becomes a series of empty passageways through sprawling forests. The city and the prison are surrounded by woods, and it is almost shocking to find a penitentiary at the end of the tree lined driveway leading to the Marquette Branch Prison (MBP). But past the MBP gates and in the only

barren area for miles around, sits the MIPC.

The MIPC is a behavior modification program designed to house about 90 "troublesome and assaultive" inmates. Originally funded by the federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, the \$1.5 million program is one of the most advanced behavior mod set-ups in the country, or for that matter in the world.

THE CENTER FOR activity and security for the prison is the Control Bubble, a complex series of instrument panels manned by two guards (or "specialists" to use Marquette terminology) who control heat light, doorways and an intercom system for every cell in the building. Cells stretch out in a four-wing X shape from the bubble, and each wing is named a different color — blue, green, orange, yellow for program purposes.

The program is based on a "token economy" system where inmates are awarded points for good behavior. In order to be promoted from one level wing to the next, a prisoner must amass anywhere from 2000 to 3000 extra tokens, and to remain on any one level, a weekly "rent" must be paid in tokens.

GREEN WING, the lowest level of the MIPC, puts virtually a total clamp on a prisoner's activity. A prisoner describes it:

"Once in Green Wing, you're not allowed anything except the necessities such as clothes, bedding, soap, etc. and many times you're denied these." Green Wing is simply sensory deprivation to the ultimate degree and it is used for brainwashing and experimentation purposes. It is also a common place for beatings, gassings, and feces in the food."

"We can't set those accusations aside," says MIPC superintendent Ronald Gach. "But we have been bombarded with investigation upon investigation. Everybody thinks we're using lobotomies, Clockwork Orange techniques."

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, a prisoner in the Yellow Wing, the highest level of the program, denied that he's been changed by behavior modification. The man is in his mid-20's, and has been in prison since 1970, but has only been in the program for six months. "No, he smiles and shrugs, "I don't think I'm any different."

Are they really using drugs here?

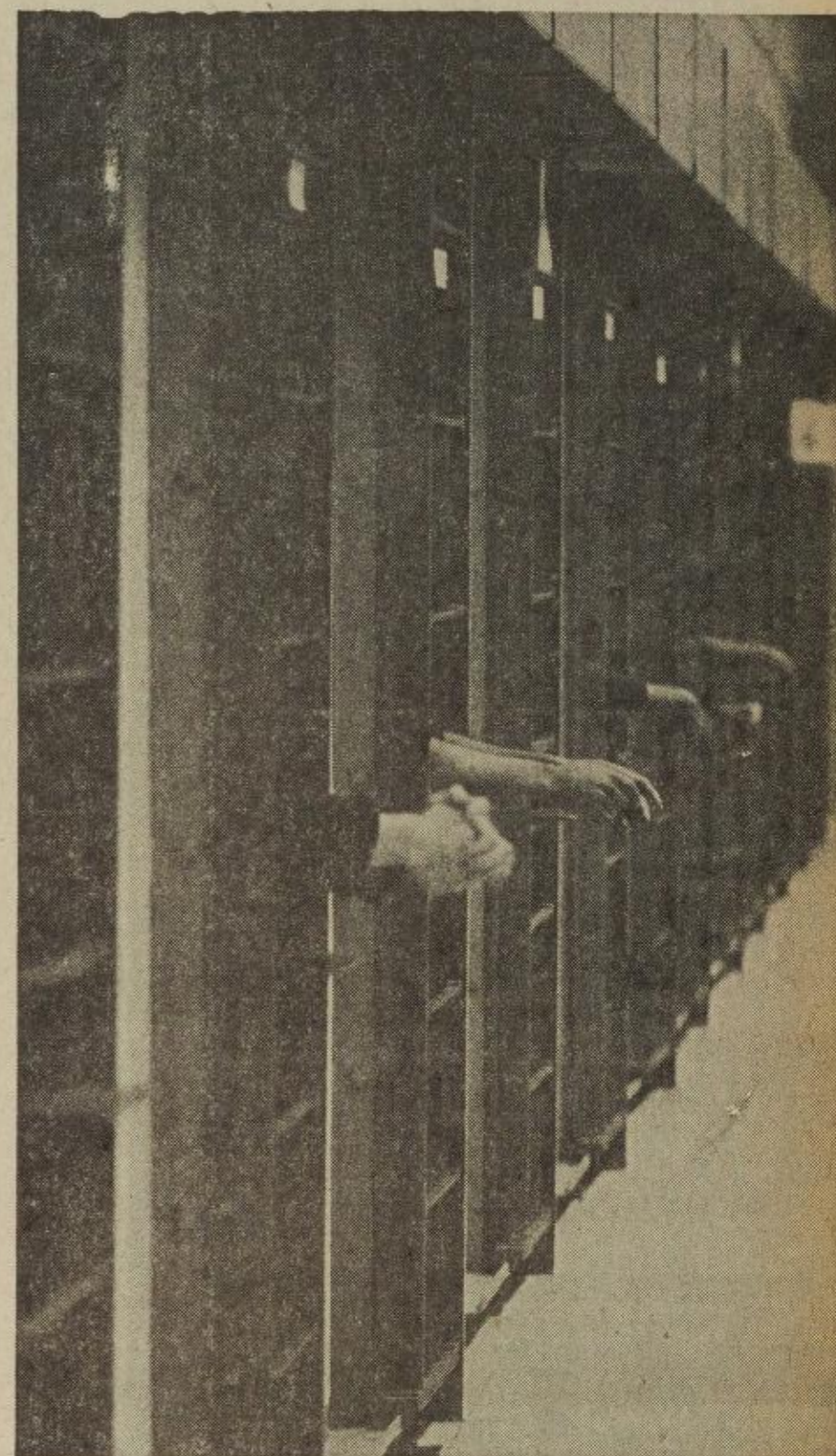
"Well, I don't know. I don't see them forcing it on anybody. I know somebody got kerosene in their food last week. And I know that sometimes I'll drink some milk here and feel myself start to go numb."

"Look," counters Gach, "what would you do if you were locked up and wanted to make life miserable for your keepers? Harrass them. Make life miserable for them. That's why they are writing the letters and saying those things."

BUT PRISON ADMINISTRATORS are circumspect in responding to these charges. They prefer to discuss the logistics of their institution.

Dr. James Metzlin, the staff psychologist, is a gnarled man who is so tired he has a perpetual flow of tears down his cheeks. "We're not interested in the mysterious little things that take place in these people's heads" says Metzlin. "Our focus here is on the objectively observable behavior. They can think about killing or raping somebody all they want."

The most serious problem with the program is that no one on the staff really has any background in behavior therapy. One administrator's definition of behavior modification was, "It's whatever you want it to be." The Marquette program designer Frank Petrock, had the sole expertise in the area, but he has long since lost contact with



Daily Photo by PAULINE LUBENS

the prison.

AND THEY'VE got a law suit on their hands.

Gabe Kamowitz of the Michigan Legal Service in Detroit is seeking to close the prison down. "The whole basis of our attack on the MIPC," he says, "is that it's an experimental process. And if we can prove it's an experiment, they ain't gonna be able to do it."

The Kamowitz case has national significance because it's not testing for obvious abuses in the MIPC program, but the concept as a whole as violating constitutional rights of the prisoners.

It could be the end of behavior modification in prison.

A RECENT AUDIT of the MIPC confirms what many people have thought all along about maintaining behavior modification programs in prison—it's expensive, in this case nearly three times the cost of a normal penitentiary.

Otherwise, life goes on quietly at Marquette with little indication the officials may face legal and fiscal trouble ahead. For the prisoners, that trouble could mean, if nothing else, the end of a program that never stops "watching" them through the walking hours of the day.

THE PUBLIC SCHOOL system has felt the effects of behavior modification probably more than the prison system, but the battles over it have been much less intense. Only a few concerned parents and some administrators have raised their voices.

And yet its use in the classroom is certainly no less experimental than behind prison bars. Except perhaps, that it is less directly manipulative since it is most often used in conjunction with other teaching methods.

But an uncomfortable number of school personnel are interested in its function as a disciplinary tool.

To a casual observer, the Mark Twain public school in Maryland is as normal and as American as its name. But subtle differences appear after an hour or two inside. Like the video cameras mounted in the corners of the classrooms. Revolving ceaselessly, noiselessly, overhead they are a permanent record of every word, action and expression registered by the students. "Sometimes we'll want to show

a kid how they're behaving," says school psychologist Steve Johnson. "With the cameras we can confront them afterwards, and say, 'You behaved this way,' and then show it to them."

BETWEEN THE VIDEO tapes, point system, 'evaluations,' compliment cards, and 'T-A' sessions the school has designed a program in which the children can probably never forget 'how they behave.'

Mark Twain is one public school which uses behavior mod as an overall approach to teaching and managing children who have been disciplinary problems in the regular school system.

Johnson said, "I don't know. I wonder sometimes if we have too . . . too much control over these kids. If you consider how much effect we can have on these lives—sometimes it reminds me of the witch-hunting in Salem, or the German persecution of the Jews."

Johnson is a young, native Nebraskan who is unusually honest in appraising the virtues and deficiencies of his own school. "But it bothers me sometimes, like we're saving to the kid 'this is the way you have to be' even if they're not that way."

TEACHERS EVALUATE their students at the beginning and end of every class hour. Students can use 'points' to buy extra food and small models. One behavior mod-style school in Washington D.C. actually has someone specially assigned to monitor the class and keep a running tab of the students' points on the blackboard.

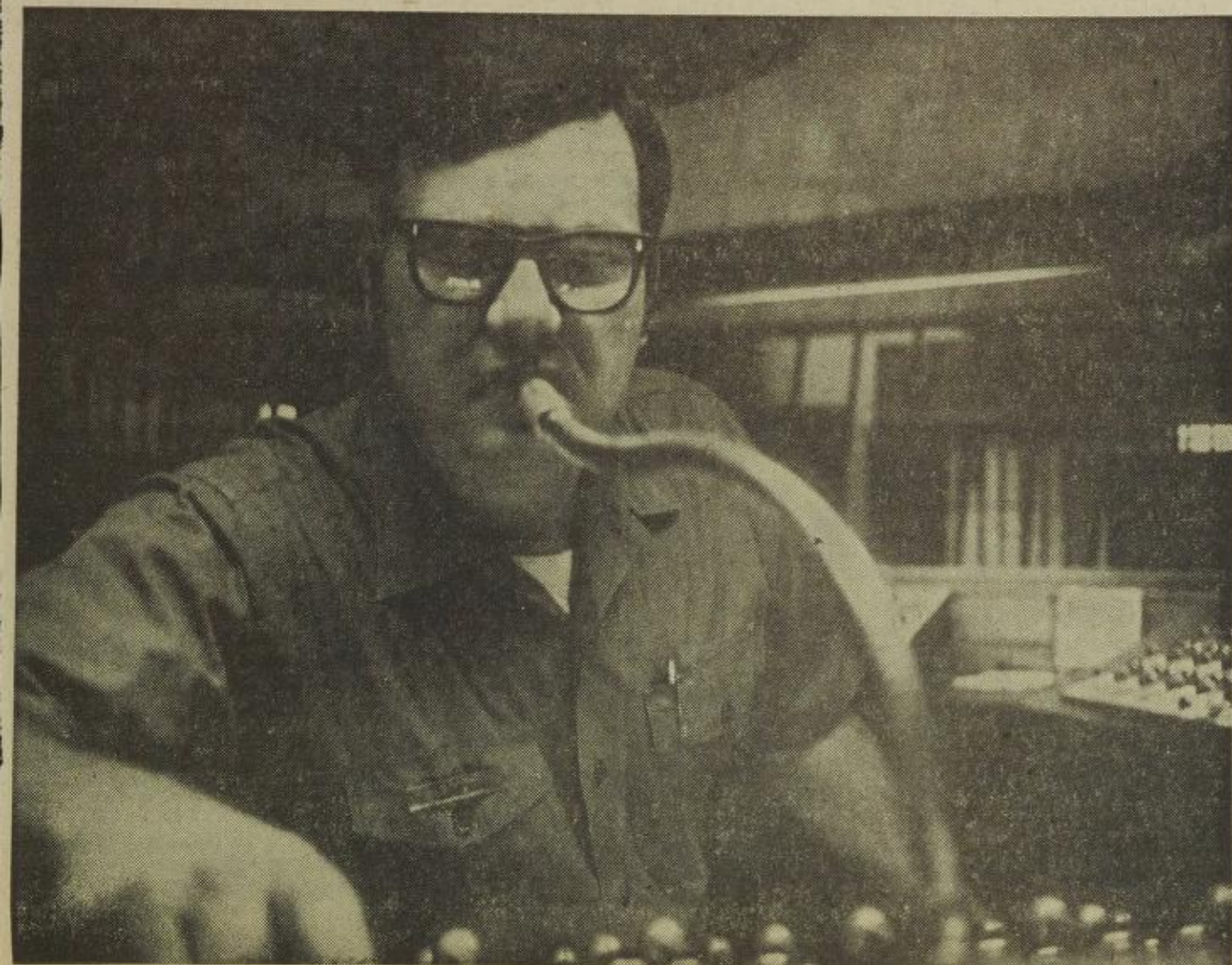
There aren't many schools in this country that use behavior modification to the extent that Mark Twain does. But many classrooms do use it in some form.

One University Education School official estimates that 85-90 per cent of the school's graduates come out with some exposure to behavior mod techniques, and about 40-50 per cent graduate with a working knowledge of them.

Ed. school prof Finley Carpenter, author of the "Skinner Primer" claims noted behaviorist B.F. Skinner "made the whole thing look

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David Weinberg worked for Metro-media in Washington, D.C. last summer, researching a documentary on Behavior Modification.



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