Attracting the Unabomber. While overselling behavior modification

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The assassination attempt

On November 15, 1985, James McConnell became the victim of an assassination attempt by a serial bomber who is known to the media as the Unabomber because his earlier victims included professors and executives of airlines. At this writing, a man suspected of being the Unabomber has been arrested. Fortunately, McConnell was not killed, but his hearing was impaired by the sound of the blast.

As far as I am able to determine, this sad episode marked the first time in the history of psychology that the murder of a psychologist was attempted, by an individual who did not know his victim, for the sole reason that the would-be assassin found the psychologist's ideas offensive. McConnell was the intended victim of the bombing, but the Unabomber's real target was applied psychology, specifically behavior modification. Unfortunately, the Unabomber selects his targets from those scientists who popularize technology with bold, simplified rhetoric that includes sweeping predictions about how technology will change society. McConnell wrote two magazine articles about behavior modification, *Psychoanalysis Must Go* for Esquire and *Criminals Can Be Brainwashed Now* for Psychology Today, either of which could have caught the Unabomber's eye. The Unabomber targeted McConnell because he popularized behavior modification.

Overpopularizing behavior modification

After McConnell's planarian research program collapsed, he turned to B. F. Skinner‘s brand of behavior modification, but his contributions to the field were not distinguished. Much as Thomas Huxley was a bulldog for Darwin‘s theory of evolution, James McConnell used his considerable rhetorical and public relations skills to popularize behavior modification. Just as John Watson oversold behaviorism during the 1920s in the media, James McConnell wrote articles for the popular press that oversold behaviorism during the 1960s.

McConnell, who wrote that the entire history of scientific psychology may be viewed as a continuing search for better controls, failed to generalize this truism from planarian learning to behavior modification. McConnell naively believed that the application of a behavioristic conception of reward and punishment would solve the social problems of crime and mental illness. He failed to recognize that the evaluation of a behavioral modification program required control groups.

Esquire tried to be funny about the 1960s, so the magazine provided an ideal forum for McConnell. In 1968, when its 35^{th} anniversary coincided with political assassinations, Esquire commissioned a set of articles around the theme Salvaging the Twentieth Century. McConnell was commissioned to write not only about what was wrong with psychology, but also about what was worth salvaging. McConnell's piece was *Psychoanalysis Must Go*, an article accompanied by a drawing in which Freud, his diploma, and his couch were caught in free fall against the background of a multistory, dingy,

office building. After an unsupported, bald assertion that psychoanalysis doesn't really help the patient at all, McConnell went on to predict that behavior modification would eliminate the need for mental hospitals and prisons. His article concluded with the following predictions:

> Mental hospitals as such will probably disappear in the next twenty years or so... Indeed, we should be able to discover methods of retraining criminals that will be so powerful we can guarantee that, once released, the prisoners will be most unlikely to commit a crime again.
>
> McConnell, 1968, p. 287

However, history shows that behavior modification led to the disappearance of neither crime nor mental illness.

By overselling behavior modification as a panacea for crime, McConnell helped plant the seeds for the public disillusionment with psychological interventions that haunts our profession today. McConnell did not realize that his overoptimism set a trap for the next generation of applied psychologists. Today, a social critic could say that these programs were not as effective as promised.

Brown demonstrated that the promoters of early applied psychology often drew metaphors from more prestigious professions such as medicine, as when the early promoters of IQ tests compared the IQ tests with thermometers. Because physics had high prestige from the nuclear weapons developed during World War II and because McConnell also knew that scary stories made news, he combined fear and the metaphor of the atomic bomb as a public relations tool to sell behavior modification when he wrote the following:

> The techniques of behavioral control make even the hydrogen bomb look like a child's toy.
>
> McConnell, 1970, p. 74

In *Psychoanalysis Must Go*, McConnell frightened his readers with a vision of an ascendant behavioral revolution so powerful and so pervasive it's doubtful that your life will ever be quite the same again. Totalitarian, antidemocratic threats also scared the American public. In a book devoted to the cultural significance of American psychology following World War II, Herman noted that

> No science poked more holes in democratic ideals than psychology.
>
> p. 23.

McConnell knew that he could scare his readers by comparing behavioral engineers with an Orwellian vision of a totalitarian state. Therefore, he ended his editorial in *Psychology Today* with a vision of a behavioral engineer with a license to redesign

American society along anticivil liberties principles: Today's behavioral psychologists are the architects and engineers of the *Brave New World*.

With his most provocative statement, McConnell wove prophecy, behavior modification, and antidemocratic rhetoric into a very scary, antidemocratic scenario:

> I believe the day has come when we can.., gain almost absolute control over an individual's behavior.., and there is no reason to believe you should have the right to refuse to acquire a new personality if your old one is antisocial.
>
> McConnell, 1970, p. 74.

McConnell lived in a period in which the popular culture was saturated with revolutionary rhetoric. In the United States during the 1960s, there was rhetoric of a sexual revolution, a Black power revolution, a revolution in the culture of popular music called rock'n'roll, and the Vietnam War produced calls for a political revolution. Therefore, it is not surprising that McConnell, who was closely attuned to popular culture, would adopt revolutionary rhetoric to advance his views. As a Skinnerian behaviorist, McConnell could honestly write that

> Today's revolutionary concept is that man's behavior can be studied, and explained, in objective terms without any necessary reference to supernatural or spiritual or mentalistic entities. 'Mind'... is as useless an explanatory concept to today's scientific psychologist as the mythical element 'phlogiston' that chemists once believed caused all fires.
>
> McConnell, 1968, p. 176

McConnell caught a high-water mark of behaviorism, just before its ebb and the rise of modern cognitive psychology.

Conclusion: some historical lessons for today from the 1960s

The history of invertebrate learning illustrates how ideas are assimilated by the scientific community. During the 1930s, invertebrates were considered little robots, guided by instincts, in which the ability to learn was, at most, ephemeral. During the 1960s, James McConnell, a creative, charismatic comparative psychologist, used the media and revolutionary rhetoric from the counterculture to glamorize planarian learning and to attack the view of the scientific establishment that invertebrates could not learn. McConnell used a Pavlovian conditioning paradigm. When the adequacy of the early data was challenged by critics, McConnell and others caught up in the espirit de corps for planarian learning introduced control groups that are still used today for Pavlovian conditioning. Although his memory-transfer paradigm for studying

the biochemical basis of memory was a failure, McConnell has not received the credit he deserves for establishing invertebrate learning. Today, invertebrate learning is so well established that citations to the earlier work are no longer considered necessary. Replication and peer review worked well for evaluating McConnell's scientific ideas.

Unfortunately, peer review does not provide a mechanism for regulating the popularization of psychological ideas by the media because journalists and the producers of television shows are not experts on the science. Because psychologists have a First Amendment right to express their views on psychological topics as they see fit, the problem of how to popularize psychology without misleading the public does not have a simple solution. As a celebrity-scientist, McConnell presented the mass audience of television, radio, and the popular press with a mixture of basic scientific information about Pavlovian conditioning in invertebrates, futuristic predictions about a memory pill, and entertainment. As a science writer, McConnell promised the public more than he could deliver. After the collapse of the planarian project, McConnell became a shill for B. E Skinner's brand of behavior modification. A behavioral engineer could guarantee that a suitably retrained prisoner with a new personality would never commit a crime. Ultimately, McConnell became more adept at publicity than in providing original contributions to the science. It appears that McConnell's public relations efforts on behalf of behavior modification led to an assassination attempt on him by the Unabomber, a Luddite opposed to behavioral engineering.

McConnell deserves to be remembered not only for his scientific creativity, but also because he was one of our field's great popular writers. The public expects prophecy from its scientists. However, McConnell did pay a cost. He provided the public with the prophecy they expected and received the fleeting fame that comes from the publicity of the moment, but at the price of professional ostracism. Fidelity to the peer-reviewed literature is proposed as an ethical standard for evaluating coverage of psychological topics for and by the media.

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