

Eye Pigeon Behavior To Aid Man's Health

By MARY ENGELS

Walter was walking around in circles. Every once in a while he'd stop to peck at a crumb, then continue on his way.

Vicki Procinsky and Jane Austin, students at Richmond College, watched him intently as he waddled along.

Walter, you see, is a pigeon, and he was being used for studying principles of learning in a behavior modification program being taught by Lanny H. Fields of Port Washington, L.I., an assistant professor of psychology at Richmond College.

On Research Project

Presently working on a research project, "Determinants of Behavior in Complex Stimulus Settings," under a grant from CUNY's Faculty Research Award Program, Fields is currently taking his students out on what he jokingly refers to as "Fields Trips."

He is involved in Behavior Modification projects at Willowbrook State School and South Beach Psychiatric Center, New York State Department of Mental Hygiene.

The programs are run in cooperation with the staff at the two state institutions with psychology students participating under Fields' direction.

The approach, Behavior Modification, is an application of learning to the treatment of patients who are mentally retarded and of patients who have psychiatric disorders.

Pigeon Seen Aid

What begins with a pigeon in a classroom can have far reaching results with a patient in a hospital in Fields' opinion.

"The concepts of behavioral theory (observed by working with pigeons such as Walter) in simplest terms are re-

sponses that are followed by reinforcers (rewarding stimuli) and increase in frequency. Responses that are not followed by reinforcers will decrease in frequency," Fields said.

His learning lab at the college resembles a vast computer complex with wires and attachments everywhere.

"Taken out of the classroom the same principles are applied to treatment in the following manner," explained Fields. "One tries to develop acceptable behavior in the residents at Willowbrook, for example, 'positive reinforcement.' Instead of punishing a patient when he exhibits 'bad behavior,' the emphasis is on rewarding a patient with edibles, praise or toys when he accomplishes something positive."

Patient's Abilities Strengthened

"Once desirable behavior has been established it is reinforced with increasing intermittency and in an increasing number of social settings, thereby enhancing the patient's ability to transfer smoothly from hospital to community settings.

"Actually the basic principles that guide us in our work with human beings aren't new. They were set up by Dr. B. F. Skinner, a famous psychologist, and a few of his associates, a few years back, which they formulated by observing pigeons and rats in Skinner boxes.

"We're simply taking the Skinneran principles out of the pigeon cage and putting them into practice with people. Other psychologists are doing it too throughout the country."

Fields is especially pleased with the results of his programs at the two state institutions.

Seven of his students work on a one-to-one basis with patients at both places and, because of this have been able to achieve some success with patients who previously had been considered capable of violent and destructive behavior.

Improvement Seen

Dr. Michael DeRespini, a psychologist and director of the new program, Behavioral Modification Unit at Willowbrook, said, "Since September when the program began with the students the patients have shown general improvement in their social and self-help skills.

"They are now frequently more responsive and less violent," he said.

Fields, who is consultant, visits the program at least once a week to see how his students are getting on. The students spend an average of four mornings a week at the institutions.

"There was one patient who bit everyone in sight, a real problem to herself and others. But since one of our undergraduates, Jay Schnabolk, has been working with her, she has managed to calm down considerably, even looking forward to his visits.

Cites Successes

"Another patient who couldn't even handle a coffee cup without throwing it at someone, now sits and plays games with student Essa Jallard who rewards

her with a drink of coffee when she makes a good move on the game board. It may sound trivial but it's a beginning. Just being able to reach out to those who were unreachable before is a good thing," said Fields.

Of course there are also the disappointments. Fields spoke of one case they were just beginning to reach at the South Beach Psychiatric Day Care Center.

"Unfortunately the family moved South. Now I'm trying to find a psychologist near them who knows all about behavior modification and believes in seeing the theory in practice."

Fields dreams of the day when behavioral techniques can be applied at community mental health centers.

"Before the patient gets into the institutions, that is," he said, "I feel so many more people could be helped if someone took the time to thoroughly research their behavioral patterns to see what makes them tick."

Describing himself as "a quiet missionary," Fields yearns for a 13-day week "to take care of my work in education, research and, of course, the practical applications. I guess you might call it my impossible dream," he said laughingly, tugging at his Van Dyke beard.

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