

## Book Reviews

TOLCHIN, MARTIN, & TOLCHIN, SUSAN J. *Glass Houses: Congressional Ethics and the Politics of Venom*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001. Pp. xiii + 201. ISBN 0-8133-6760-3

Congress continues to provide clear examples of a number of principles of behavior analysis. (For an earlier description of aspects of Congress in behavior analytic terms, see Lamal & Greenspoon, 1992). This is illustrated in the Tolchins' description of congressional ethics and their detailed account of different kinds of ethical lapses and issues that have confronted Congress in recent years. The authors also provide examples of congressional misbehavior from the 18th century, the Joseph McCarthy era, and into the 1960s.

Perhaps counterintuitively, the Tolchins maintain that members of Congress "are more honest and more ethical today than ever before" (p. ix). It is not that they are inherently better people. Rather, current contingencies increase the likelihood that at least blatantly unethical behavior is avoided. Members' behavior is more closely rule-governed because the consequences of unethical behavior can be sufficiently punishing to the transgressor. And particularly in a time of extreme partisanship in Congress the ethics process is inherently political.

The "ethics wars" of the 1980s and 1990s continue to plague Congress. And all of them revolve around such putative positive reinforcers as money, power, and sex, or more precisely, members' behaviors in pursuit of those consequences. The partisan nature of the ethical arena is exemplified by the cases of two Speakers of the House of Representatives, Jim Wright (D-Texas) and Newt Gingrich (R-Georgia). Then an obscure backbencher, Gingrich in 1987 accused the then-Speaker Wright of 69 ethics violations. As the negative publicity mounted, Democratic elders persuaded Wright to resign from the House. The consequence for Gingrich was a significant boost in his trajectory to the speakership, surely a positive reinforcer for him. But then it was Gingrich's turn to be punished as a result of the partisan approach to ethics. As a result of charges of ethics violations and after a bruising, partisan House battle in 1997, the House voted to reprimand Speaker Gingrich and also levied a \$300,000 fine against him. Gingrich resigned from the speakership and in 1998 gave up this congressional seat.

The Tolchins do not emphasize it, but a fundamental cause of much of congressional wrongdoing is members' pursuit of reelection; again, a consequence that can reasonably be described as highly positively reinforcing to most members. And the consequence of reelection depends upon raising large amounts of campaign funds and working on behalf of constituents, particularly constituents who can provide large amounts of campaign money. The Tolchins provide examples of House members' unethical behavior with respect to campaign funds and Elizabeth Drew (1999) has described a campaign finance system that is out of control and that Congress refuses to reform. From a behavior analytic point of view it is clear why the system has not been reformed—it reinforces those who maintain it with their reelection.

But one person's unethical behavior is another's constituent service. Members of Congress take service to constituents very seriously, and it can take many forms,

from getting a delayed Social Security check mailed, to obtaining federal funding for the establishment or maintenance of civilian or military agencies in the member's district or state, to obtaining tax breaks for businesses. According to the Tolchins, the harshest ethical conflicts today revolve around the meaning of constituent service. "Constituent service is engraved into the job description of a member of Congress, and politicians who forget it often find themselves voted out of offices" (p. 49). An extremely powerful contingency. The Tolchins describe the Abscam investigation of the late 1970s and early 1980s and the Keating savings and loan case of the early 1990s as classic examples of unethical behavior that the accused maintained were just instances of constituent service. The statutes still do not define what differentiates acceptance of bribes from legitimate constituent service, and the statutes concerned with conflicts of interest are similarly unclear. Thus rule-governed behavior can take various forms when the rules are vague.

Another factor working against ethical rule-governed behavior is Congress's reluctance to discipline its members. The Constitution gives Congress sole authority to discipline its members, but as the Tolchins make clear, it has consistently failed to do so. And in fact, the House and Senate Ethics Committees in the last couple of years have moved to limit ethics investigations further by restricting the right of those who complain about unethical behavior. What is most important for members to avoid is bringing disgrace on Congress. According to the Tolchins, the only reliable rule of thumb as to whether Congress will discipline its members appears to be public reaction to an infraction. "The severity of the punishment depends on exactly how much the individual in question has disgraced the institution, for given their druthers, lawmakers would much rather sweep ethics issues under the rug" (p. 73). It is reasonable to surmise that this state of affairs is caused by members' concern with reelection. If voters associate their senator or representative with a group that elicits a negative emotional reaction, that member may suffer decisively on election day.

Although the public's opinion of Congress continues to decline, according to the Tolchins, incumbents are overwhelmingly reelected. This paradox is resolved when one considers the positive reinforcers that incumbents are able to provide their constituents ("constituent service" again) as well as the large campaign finance chests they are able to accumulate during their incumbency, as groups and individuals reinforce them for past votes and prompt future favorable treatment.

When describing and interpreting the behaviors of groups in society one must be aware of the danger of oversimplifying. At the same time, however, nothing that is described in *Glass Houses* comes as a surprise to a behavior analyst.

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KASSER, TIM. *The high price of materialism*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002. Pp. xiii + 149. ISBN 0-262-11268-X

There is little doubt that Americans are world-class when it comes to consumption. Consumer spending accounts for two thirds of U. S. economic activity (Beck, 2002). Americans constitute just 5% of the world's population but generate 30% of the World's Gross Product and consume nearly 30% of global oil production (Judt, 2002). So being able to have so much makes Americans happier than those less fortunate, right? Wrong, says Kasser. Rather, he says, research indicates that beyond having sufficient food, shelter, and clothing, "attaining wealth, possessions, and status does not yield long-term increases in our happiness or well-being" (Kasser, 2002, p. 42).

Kasser bases his critique on humanistic and existential theorizing. On this view, materialistic values diminish our personal freedom. "To the extent that people value wealth, fame, and image, they correspondingly place less value on authenticity and freedom" (Kasser, 2002, p. 75). Kasser posits four sets of needs that are basic to the motivation and well-being of all humans. These are needs for safety and sustenance; for competence and self-esteem; for connectedness; and for autonomy and authenticity. He maintains that each of these needs appears to be unfulfilled when people focus on material pursuits. In capitalistic, consumerist cultures, such as the United States, however, the pursuit of extrinsic values such as external rewards and the praise of others are encouraged.

Kasser cites research that he says indicates a definite pattern of psychological and physical problems associated with holding wealth, popularity, and image as important. Materialistic people, for example, reported lower life satisfaction and self-actualization than nonmaterialistic people. Materialistic people also experience more alienation in their social relationships than nonmaterialistic people. Materialistic people are said to place less emphasis on their interpersonal relationships and to contribute less to their community. Materialistic values diminish our personal freedom, may negatively affect marriages, and are associated with low interest in environmental issues.

In Kasser's view, materialism is the result of a motivational system focused on external rewards and praise. Autonomy and self-expression, however, derive from intrinsic motivation. Thus, Kasser cites the research of Deci, Ryan, and others to demonstrate that external rewards reduce intrinsic motivation. In their thorough analysis of the literature, however, Cameron and Pierce (2002) have persuasively shown that the supposedly straightforward, negative relationship between external rewards and intrinsic motivation is fraught with problems. They describe problems with the very concept of intrinsic motivation, with the studies said to show that external rewards are harmful, and with the conclusions drawn from these studies.

Many of the problems with this book are ones that Cameron and Pierce (2002) found are prevalent in the literature on intrinsic motivation. In both, there is a consistent misunderstanding of behavioral psychology, particularly behavior analysis. Kasser asserts, for example, that "much of the work conducted by . . . behavioral psychologists is quite compatible with the notion that attainment of wealth and status is of great importance . . . behavioral theories such as B. F. Skinner's . . . hold that the successful attainment of external rewards is a motivator of all behavior" (Kasser, 2002, p. 2).

Among the other problems with Kasser's thesis is that, with one exception, the supporting data he cites are all correlational. Thus, we cannot answer the question as to whether materialism causes psychological problems, or vice versa. We also are not able to determine the extent to which research participants'

responses to surveys reflects their behaviors of interest outside of the study environment. Critical concepts are either ill-defined (e.g., needs for autonomy and authenticity) or not defined at all (e.g., "connectedness," "flow"), even though they are often supposed to be explanatory.

Kasser has identified a serious problem characteristic of most, if not all, societies in the developed world. The endless pursuit of consumer goods far beyond what people need causes pollution and ecological devastation. And rapidly developing countries are well along the same path. Unfortunately, however, the approach advocated by Kasser in this often repetitious book offers no practical solutions to the problem.

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