Habits of Thinking: Working Within Correctional Environments to Introduce and Sustain Personal Change

by Ray Ferns*

> Your beliefs become your thoughts; your thoughts become your words; your words become your actions; your actions become your habits; your habits become your values; your values become your destiny!
>
> —*Mahatma Gandhi*

As a practitioner, educator, administrator, and consultant in corrections for nearly 30 years now, I continue to be curious and hopeful about the prospect of change. My optimism is rooted in my belief that there are positive answers to the questions that confront us:

- What helps people change?
- Can corrections personnel help facilitate that process?
- Can habits of thinking influence behavior?
- If so, can these habits be broken, if necessary?

In this article, I will explore the influence of cognitive structures (i.e., patterns of thinking, attitudes and beliefs, and emotions) on human biology and behavior. I will present evidence from Social Learning Theory and evolutionary biology that shows the impact of patterns of thinking on behavioral outcomes and will pose the question of how best to derail counterproductive patterns of automatic thinking.

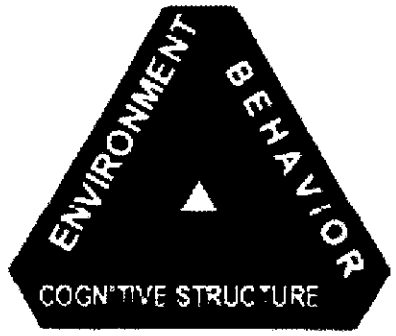
The Apple Doesn't Fall Far From the Tree: The Influence of DNA and Environment

The theory of human behavior that offers the best explanation for the body of research termed "'What Works' to Reduce Recidivism" is Social Learning Theory. Albert Bandura, cited as the father of this theory, conceptualizes three primary forces that explain human behavior (Bandura, 1977). These forces are behavior, environment, and cognitive structure. Figure 1 demonstrates how these forces interact in a triadic, dynamic relationship, each subject to change and the potential influence of the others.

For example, when the price of gasoline climbed over three dollars per gallon in the United States, many people changed some of their driving habits (e.g., choosing places to vacation that were closer to home or sharing rides with others). This spike in gas prices resulted in part from natural disasters: two hurricanes in the Gulf Coast. Both of those events— the hurricanes and the rise in gas prices— introduced significant changes into our shared environment. These external environmental changes triggered changes in our thoughts and emotions (i.e., our cognitive structure) that in turn produced changes in our behavior. This process is what Bandura refers to as a triadic, dynamic relationship.

In his book *The Biology of Belief*, Bruce Lipton offers some convincing biological evidence to support Social Learning Theory. Lipton, a former medical school professor and research scientist, rejects the prevailing theory of human development: that genes and DNA hard-wiring control our biology and our personality. Instead, he claims that human DNA is influenced by signals outside the cell, including energy coming from outside the body or signals from our environment—signals that are influenced by the way that we think (Lipton, 2005).

Figure 1: The Three Primary Forces Behind Human Behavior



Evidence for Social Learning Theory: Brain Waves

One of the main tenets of Social Learning Theory asserts that *modeling* shapes human behavior. According to Bandura, children observe and interact with their environment mostly through observation. Thus, they model their behavior after what they see going on around them. This modeling effect is strengthened when the relationship between the child and the adult model is emotionally strong and when the model is the object of the child's admiration, respect, and love. So, for most of us, the modeling and shaping of both our behaviors and internal attitudes and beliefs about the world come from the people who parent us (Bandura, 1977).

Bandura's conclusion about this modeling effect is bolstered by biological evidence. Rima Laibow describes the progression of human developmental stages in the context of changes that she observed in the electrical impulses generated by the brain as recorded by electroencephalography (EEG) (Laibow, 1999). Laibow identified five distinct wave levels that correspond to the progression in human development:

1. *Delta.* Between birth and two years of age, the human brain predominantly operates at the lowest EEG frequency (0.5 to 4 cycles (Hz) per second), known as delta waves.

   The lower delta frequency range (the range that hypnotherapists use to put people in more suggestible states) provides us with some important understanding of how, in human development, information is acquired and stored. Young children, from birth to two years of age, are biologically configured to observe and store vast amounts of information from their environment. As a result, the behaviors and beliefs of their models, which most commonly would be the parents, are adopted, often stored at a subconscious delta level (Laibow, 1999). In short, for the first two years of life, young children

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spend their time being as suggestible as hypnotherapy clients.

2. *Theta.* Between the ages of two and six, children begin to spend more time at a higher EEG activity level (4 to 8 Hz), known as theta (Laibow, 1999).
3. *Alpha.* Between the ages of six and 12, individuals move out of the delta and theta ranges and become somewhat less susceptible to environmental influences as the brain begins to operate on higher alpha frequency waves (8 to12 Hz). This range is described as a calm consciousness or awareness of self (Laibow, 1999).
4. *Beta.* Around the age of 12, children begin to show signs of sustained frequencies between 12 and 35 Hz, know as beta waves. This range is characterized as "active or focused consciousness," the kind of brain activity necessary to read, integrate, and comprehend (Laibow, 1999).
5. *Gamma.* Beyond beta, we find the highest EEG spectrum, gamma waves (35 Hz and higher). These levels are observed when humans are engaged in a peak performance activity, such as landing an airplane.

The EEG research helps us to understand the developmental process whereby information is integrated from our environment into our subconscious and conscious minds. It also helps us to understand, as Bandura observed, the importance of modeling in shaping our behavior.

Evidence From Evolutionary Biology

In addition to the foregoing supporting research from Laibow, the concept of modeling behavior is also supported by evidence from evolutionary biology. The study of evolution shows how reflex behaviors acquired during evolution are passed on to offspring in the form of genetic-based instincts. The evolution of larger brains, however, with their increased neural cell population, provided humans with the opportunity to learn from their life experiences and not rely solely on instinctual behavior (Lipton, 2005).

Thus, behavior is regulated by both instinctual behaviors ("no brainers" or subconscious reactions) and conscious prefrontal cortex functions (e.g., problem solving). In humans, as development progresses and patterns of thinking and feeling are established in response to changes in the environment, neurological pathways are created. When these patterns of thought and feeling become habits, the neurological pathways become ruts in the subconscious, and without conscious effort, we fall back into these ruts (Lipton, 2005).

For example, think back to when you first learned to drive a car. At first, the pedal locations and the temperamental process of engaging and disengaging the clutch were the focus of active "thinking." You had to think about how much pressure from your foot was required to stop, and you had to think about all those minor corrections of the steering wheel necessary to keep the car moving in the proper direction. Over time, however, these functions became "no brainers." Now, you undoubtedly jump in the car, start it, and are well down the road thinking about how your day went and what's for dinner, and you have never given conscious thought to any of these driving tasks.

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Therefore, participation in the development and effectiveness of community corrections programs is essential to their role in crime prevention. As one previously hard-line prosecutor recently said: "I don't want to see this guy again." These comments are not to denigrate the many prosecutors who have been seriously committed to working with reentry support within their communities. You will hear more about these pioneers. My remarks are meant to say, that on a national level and on a big-picture level, prosecutors have not been a significant voice in reentry policies. That's now old news.

The APRI Study. The APRI survey has undertaken to study results in various communities, summarize the issues and practices, and highlight those where significant exemplary progress is being made. Incidentally, one of the issues revealed in the study is the vagueness in definition of the word "reentry." Many prosecutors are engaged in programs that they do not call reentry and do not recognize under the rubric, but nevertheless are effectively, if

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"end" of client success. Although Pioneer Human Services is completely organized as a nonprofit, it has adopted proven business methods in its operations, including incorporating various financial disciplines found in for-profit businesses, cultivating its external customers, and implementing a comprehensive outcomes measurement system. Outcomes measurement at Pioneer includes not only the financial bottom line but also the programmatic bottom line, comparing client progress with targeted goals.

For Pioneer, being a "nonprofit" reflects its legal status, not its managerial style. Although few nonprofit organizations may feel comfortable matching the entrepreneurial commitment of Pioneer, many are very interested in becoming more businesslike in their operations and expanding earned income opportunities. To assist them, Pioneer has recently created a new division, Pioneer Consulting Services, which specializes in expanding entrepreneurial capacity and opportunities. Bill Shore, in his book *The Cathedral Within*, which chronicles leaders in the new social enterprise movement, may have said it best: "Pioneer Human Services was not the first example of community-wealth creation in the country. It is just one of the largest, and arguably, most impressive." ■

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From the preceding example, it is clear that conditioning the mind to think in certain ways strengthens the neurological connections, so that over time people have conditioned responses to their environment. In other words, *we don't have to think*. But perhaps we should.

Why should we? All of the foregoing findings suggest that not only does our cognitive structure (our internal system of thoughts, sensations, and emotions), affect our behavior, but the way we think also affects our biology. By the time a person reaches adolescence, the subconscious mind is neurologically programmed with messages, good or bad, that function as personal beliefs. The power, habituation, and influence of these beliefs, these so-called personal "truths," on behavior throughout the spectrum of a person's life are profound! In humans, the behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes that we observe in our parents tend to become ingrained "neuro-nets," hard-wired synaptic pathways that influence our biology as well as our behavior. While we do not necessarily have to turn into our parents, without conscious changes in our thought processes, our biology takes over.

Derailing Automatic Thinking

> Every interaction between a correctional practitioner and an offender is an opportunity to do one of two things: either reinforce the offender's automatic thinking (internal habits, neuro-nets of thinking, feeling, attitudes/beliefs) or to purposefully disrupt that thinking (Ferns, 2002).

Within correctional settings (jails, probation offices, detention centers, prisons, etc.), the focus has traditionally been on controlling offender/inmate behaviors. Understandably, the top priority in every correctional facility is security (the safe, humane, and legally mandated operation of the facility, along with escape and assault prevention).

While the focus on control, punishment, and compliance is understandable, it falls short of what we know must be done to support change in offenders. If change is to occur, we must target how offenders think—and must create internal motivation for them to change their thinking.

Gornik et al. (1999, p. 4) offer this insightful analysis of the criminal mind:

> Antisocial thinking is very seldom simply a matter of imagining crimes or plotting assaults. With most offenders, there is almost always a more subtle network of attitudes, beliefs, and thinking patterns that create an entitlement and righteousness about selfish and harmful acts. Antisocial thinking provides a self-validating and rewarding escape from responsibility and social norms. Many offenders are accustomed to feeling unfairly treated and have learned a defiant, hostile attitude as part of their basic orientation toward life and other people. Hostile responses and victim-stance thinking are learned cognitive behaviors. For the offender, feeling like a victim creates a sense of outrage, power, and self-gratification. These powerful emotional experiences create cognitive reinforcement. Conversely, to admit a mistake would be a sign of weakness and vulnerability. Relationships with other people are adversarial and dominated by a struggle for power. Cooperation is seldom more than a passing convenience. A win-lose (us/them) orientation dominates personal relationships. Winning is defined as forcing someone else to lose. The gratification that comes with this kind of winning is, for some offenders, the only real satisfaction and gratification they ever learned. This need to win is exaggerated in the offenders' interactions with security staff. Whether they win or lose, the underlying cognitive structure is reinforced. This self-serving logic creates a vicious cycle [internal citation omitted]. As offenders progress through treatment, respect for custody staff is an important measure of change. Research has also identified motivation and readiness to change as main factors in successful treatment outcomes.

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Opportunities to disrupt criminal thinking within the daily operation of correctional facilities and offices are abundant. With recidivism rates in the balance and public safety as the primary goal, the viability and opportunity for change cannot be left as the sole responsibility of good programs. Probation officers, correctional staff, and security, program, and support staff also can (and should) learn how to interact with offenders in ways that purposefully target the thinking behind criminal behavior.

The importance and the potential influence of probation officers and other correctional staff as they model behavior, attitudes, and beliefs for this population cannot be overestimated. While interactions between staff and offenders are often short, these short interactions, when focused, can and do have an impact on offender thinking. Imagine creating a correctional culture and a correctional environment where there is no escape from the opportunity for change and no escape from the responsibility for change. Imagine a culture speaking in one voice and with one message that is consistently applied. When such environments are purposefully created, the opportunity for change is real.

The Unfortunate Reality

Given that we have seen the critical importance of thinking as it relates to influencing behavior and biology, do we see practices that capitalize on this knowledge, day to day, in juvenile and adult correctional environments? Sadly, within these environments, effective programming is largely absent. It is not uncommon for communities or correctional staffs to view corrective programs as forms of "coddling" inmates. Punishment, to this way of thinking, is the necessary means for purging criminal behavior.

In the typical correctional environment, the primary focus of daily operations is on cleaning, feeding, clothing, monitoring, reporting, and safely moving offenders from place to place. Outside the institutions, in community corrections, we often find probation officers focused on contact requirements and supervision standards that have nothing to do with corrective intervention. A visit to the probation office might, for example, involve a superficial paper report, a quick exchange of payments and receipts, and a rapid-fire succession of yes-no questions, perhaps concluding with a halfhearted referral for service.

When and if the foregoing operational and procedural requirements are met, then and only then can time be allotted for "programming." Unfortunately, even then, "programming" is often no more than allowing an offender out of his or her room or cell for an hour or less or showing attendance slips from Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings. Policy, training, and the bulk of correctional funding are focused on the application of rewards and punishments, with the goal of compliance—not behavioral change.

Yet, without purposeful interventions, offenders are left to fester in their cells or associate with other inmates—and the effect of either course is to entrench more deeply those neuro-nets that are at the root of criminal behavior. Then, when these offenders are released, we wonder why recidivism rates are so high.

Why Jail Doesn't Work

We know that relying on punishment—both as a program focus and as motivation for change—does not work with this population to reduce recidivism (Gendreau, 1990). We also know that punishment or the threat of punishment alone often does very little to disrupt automatic thinking.

If you doubt this, think back to the last time you got a speeding ticket. Can you remember some of your thoughts? Maybe some of them sounded like this:

- What a bunch of crap.
- Everyone else out here is driving just as fast.
- Guess I'll have to watch a little closer next time.

How long did your resolution to "watch a little closer" last? Did that one speeding fine make a lasting impact on behavior? For most of us, as long as the burden of the ticket and the thought of getting another remains vivid in our minds, we alter our behavior. Over time, however, we gravitate back to the ruts in our thinking, and we offer the same old rationalizations: "Everyone else is doing it. Besides, it's only speeding. It's not as if I'm robbing banks." When we fall back into these old thinking habits, our old behavior returns, as sure as the spring rain. Humans, criminal or not, especially in times of stress, fall back on that to which they are most accustomed and with which they feel most comfortable—regardless of ultimate consequences.

In a study conducted in Oregon that compared recidivism outcomes between those offenders who received jail as a violation sanction with offenders who received some form of lesser graduated sanction, researchers found lower recidivism rates for those probationers who did not go to jail:

> Comparing groups of offenders who have committed the same types of crimes, and who have the same risk to re-offend, for every group, the recidivism rate is higher following a jail sanction than it is following a community-alternative sanction (Martin, 2003, p. 27).

To take it a step further, when I was a probation officer years ago, I remember how it seemed as if all of the offenders who ultimately landed back in jail had told me how determined they were to find a job or how motivated they were to get back into treatment—on their first day in jail. Once they had returned to the community, however, the lessons they said they had learned from being in jail seemed to vanish from their minds as quickly as that new job prospect or the treatment they were attending. Why? Because the consequence of going to jail failed to change their thinking and their fundamental attitudes and beliefs.

If Jail Fails, What Succeeds?

As we have seen, effective interventions are those that target antisocial, procriminal beliefs and attitudes and replace them with prosocial, responsible beliefs and attitudes. Such interventions require environments where the opportunity for change—and the responsibility for change—are inescapable. Now comes the hardest question of all: Can we create such environments for offenders when we in corrections fall victim to counterproductive habits of thinking ourselves?

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