

[Column 5 Set 2] Exploring More Mysteries of Living: Speak Up For Rights



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Why these Columns? Because human behavior causes global problems, and solving these problems requires changes in human behavior... So *everyone* benefits from knowing something about the natural science of human behavior that these columns describe. See the 72 columns of the first set, in the *Explaining Mysteries of Living* book or on **BehaviorInfo.com**, for the *basics* of this science.

The previous column considered values and their connection to reinforcers. This column turns to rights and their connection to values, all as part of the connected sequence of reinforcers, values, rights, ethics, and morals.

While the term *values* refers to reinforcers, the term *rights* refers to access to values, to reinforcers. Given this connection to physical, measurable realities, which includes behaviors and contingencies, we can focus on rights (and, later, ethics and morals) as events amenable to all the scientific consideration that we cover in natural behavior science.

We define a right as unhindered access to a value, to a reinforcer. This definition comes from the contingencies, often of deprivation or coercion, that compel particular forms of verbal behavior, forms that we call statements about rights. These rights statements often take the form of claims regarding unhindered access to valued reinforcers.

Those contingencies of deprivation or coercion also compel non-verbal behavior as specific activities that support the rights and obtain the reinforcers, activities often involved in the exercise of the rights. We generally think (i.e., behave) rather abstractly regarding a right, while the rights claim or exercise of the right constitutes a range of more concrete behavioral events.

Let's examine rights a little more deeply. When deprivation accumulates, or when something functions as coercion by getting in the way of our access to a reinforcer, we then claim access to the reinforcer as our right. Sometimes we claim an access right individually, and at other times we claim an access right as a member of a group.

Sometimes rights refer, as values, to an immediate, personal reinforcer. At other times

rights refer to long-standing, traditional reinforcers. As an example of a right to an immediate, personal and individual reinforcer, after coming home tired at the end of a noisy and energy costly work shift, one might claim, as a right, access to a period of some simple peace and quiet in a home that otherwise features the more usual racket of kids and blaring stereos or radios or televisions or computer games.

As an example of a right to a group-shared, long-standing traditional reinforcer, consider some government agency making illegal the defense of one's person or loved ones against immediate threats of harm, a circumstance that some describe as both deprivation and coercion. The affected group of law-abiding citizens might raise a chorus of claims for restoration of the right of self defense.

The affected group in this case really includes everyone, although not everyone participates or even always comprehends the shared, long-range interest in the group's endeavor. Even looking just at the twentieth century, many historical examples of tyrannical behavior begin with someone—often not a tyrannical person or government—disarming a population, sometimes for what seem like good reasons. The tyrant or tyrannical government then comes to power more easily due to the disarmed population.

However, very few if any historical examples have such tyrants or governments lasting uninterrupted for very long. Tyrannical coercion still induces the full force of countercoercion that sooner or later ends its reign.

Between and beyond those possibilities remain many of the rights that our individual and group contingency history has conditioned, including our national political contingency history. Think about the Bill of Rights in, and Amendments to, the U.S. Constitution. We say a person is exercising a right when stimuli evoke behaviors that produce the values (i.e., the reinforcers) to which the right pertains.

One need not exercise a right, however, to be eligible to make rights claims about the related values (reinforcers). For example, all law-abiding citizens in the U.S. can make reasonable rights claims about an individual, constitutional, First Amendment right to speak and believe “freely” (i.e., without coercion in their contingencies) or a Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms. Yet only a subset of all U.S. citizens may be exercising these rights during any given period or in any particular location.

Indeed, not everyone who could make a claim, for a right to unimpeded access to particular valued reinforcers, needs to exercise the claimed right as the only avenue producing the benefits of that right. For instance, FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) statistics for 2011 indicate ongoing reductions of violent crimes in general, and of murders in particular, both of which are down about 50 percent over the last 20 years to a more than 40-year low, a period during which the number of U.S. states with right-to-carry-concealed-arms laws increased to over 40. (Anyone can check more recent years for comparison.)

Those trends typify states that implement Second-Amendment supporting laws. The opposite trend typifies states with governments that enforce laws essentially requiring that citizen adults and children become victims—wounded, raped, maimed, or killed—if the local police are unable to reach the scene before harm occurs during a crime against the citizens.

Technically, while some could argue that these data currently convey correlational relationships, others could argue that state legislatures have already organized and carried out repeated and reasonable equivalents of experimental research that makes these statistics convey functional relationships. Either way we can scientifically appreciate the conclusions and implications.

All citizens benefit when criminal activity decreases as a result of, or at least in the presence of, laws that recognize the right of responsible armed self defense. In such states, any potential victim *could* be a law-abiding citizen legally carrying a concealed self-defense firearm. This status makes, through processes like generalization, *all* such potential victims—whether carrying or not—less evocative of the illegal behaviors of criminals or would-be criminals. So everyone, even those who are not carrying, benefits from this right. (To review generalization, see column 22 in the first set of columns.)

Maintaining rights necessarily involves some risks. For example, tragic firearm accidents and incidents can offset some of the group advantages and benefits from self-defense rights activity. Nevertheless the contingencies of risk induce risk-management efforts. According to our government's statistics, accidents have steadily reduced during decades of successful, ongoing and broadly based citizen education programs in firearms safety, which justifies continuing those programs.

Your perusal of government reports at your local library, or online, will provide you with the latest statistics, which have been along the lines of these examples for decades now. But we also need solutions that *actually* reduce violent incidents. Some incidents appear partly due to global-problem overpopulation pressures

In addition to governments, other groups implement sanctions against, or establish arrangements to protect, various rights claims. Perhaps the most powerful, and also sometimes dangerous, of these groups include corporations and religions.

Another set of rights that everyone needs to exercise, and about which everyone could make access claims, pertains to *green* rights. These include rights to clean air and fresh water, to a healthy atmosphere and an intact ozone layer, to pesticide-free food and safe transportation, to enabled recycling and sustainable living, *to a population level within the planet's carrying capacity*, and so on. Keep these in view as we move on to consider ethics, and then morals.

Find the mentioned column 22 in *Explaining Mysteries of Living*. The BOOKS page at www.behaviorology.org has a full description of this book.

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