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Challenging behaviour, challenging environments, and challenging needs

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PSYCHOLOGICAL INQUIRY ... starts with the individual and his micro-environment, and moves on the one side to the more conventional study of enduring or developmental characteristics of persons, and on the other side to studies of institutions, or as we have called them, organisational structures, and their effects upon the behaviour of the individual "actors" (Tizard, 1976, p.231).

John Clements (1992) is surely right in his contention that the understanding of challenging behaviour in people with learning disabilities suffers from too narrow a framework and is not properly placed in the broader contexts of the person's life, and psychological theory. I should like to describe a simple framework for thinking about challenging behaviour which seems to address some of the issues raised, and to consider how the framework fares when evaluated by the criteria which Clements outlined.

I want to start by describing two experiences of challenging behaviour which indicate the range of its manifestations and, possibly, the range of its causes. Recently I watched a video of an individual in a staffed house in London. The individual was in a wheelchair and had badly disfigured limbs, probably the result of cerebral palsy. He appeared to have no speech but could make indecipherable noises. The video was only about ten minutes long and showed the individual being "prepared" for dinner by a member of staff. Having been prepared, the individual sat in his wheelchair for about five minutes with his back to staff while they worked in the kitchen or watched TV. He was then wheeled to the table and left for another five minutes before dinner arrived. During the video he displayed a number of behaviours which could be called "challenging". He bit himself, with difficulty, banged his fist on his face, made numerous noises and seemed to be struggling to turn towards where the staff and the noise from the TV was. These behaviours intensified while he waited. No staff response was forthcoming. The

video was quite disturbing to watch, both because of the degree to which the man was ignored and moved around like a piece of meat and also because of the clear effects which this had on his behaviour. It is not hard to explain this man's challenging behaviour – give him a decent service, treat him like a human being and try to serve him, rather than process him, and his challenging behaviour would disappear.

My second example is of a lady with whom I worked some years ago. She had a very mild degree of learning disability, had a psychiatric diagnosis of schizophrenia and displayed a variety of challenging behaviours. These included coming out of her room in the middle of the night and shouting that people were trying to break into the house, that someone was telling her that her brother was dead, and so on. The relationship between her behaviour and her environment appeared tenuous. For example, by getting her to phone her brother it was possible to temporarily reassure her that he was not dead, but half an hour later she might well be talking again as if he were.

There are all sorts of challenging behaviour displayed by people with learning disabilities in between these two relative extremes. The range has a very simple lesson – in trying to explain challenging behaviour we need to consider both causes in the environment and causes in the individual.

A framework for understanding challenging behaviour must be able to encompass both of these examples. We set up false dichotomies at our peril. It is too easy, and simply wrong, to use these examples to argue that some challenging behaviour is environmentally produced while some has its roots within the individual, for example, in psychiatric "disorder". Such a position is wrong on two counts. Much of the challenging behaviour which we see as having a clear relationship to the environment occurs partly because of unmet individual needs; the

person's limited communication skills mean that she cannot understand what is asked of her and so she attempts, perhaps successfully, to avoid responding to requests by becoming aggressive. Similarly, even where challenging behaviour is clearly related to internal psychological distress, there is good evidence that its expression is modulated by the environment – people with the diagnosis of schizophrenia do much better in certain sorts of environments. As well as being wrong, such an approach runs the grave risk of separate development. If we classify people's behaviour as either environmentally or individually produced, they are likely to be referred to different professionals and be assessed in different ways, and consequently get quite different treatments which do not properly consider the contribution of non-environmental or non-individual factors to their behaviour.

We need a framework which is rather more comprehensive and encourages us to work with the person as a whole. Such a framework might include three categories of cause of challenging behaviour - challenging needs, challenging environments and interaction effects (see Figure 1).

Challenging needs are those features of individuals which are associated with a higher probability of challenging behaviour: some neuropsychiatric disorders, limited communication ability, sensory impairment and so on. These are needs that individuals bring with them into new environments, though they are not necessarily entirely independent of previous environments: the amount of help that an individual has had previously to develop their communication skills is likely to be linked to their current ability to communicate. Challenging needs (for example sensory impairment) are not necessarily open to complete or even partial remediation, though they are far more remediable than is commonly practised.

Challenging environments are those features of the social and physical environment which are known to be associated with an increased probability of challenging behaviour, such as overcrowding, abuse and a lack of any meaningful activity.

Challenging needs and challenging environments are interdependent. Thus some needs are more likely to lead to challenging behaviour in
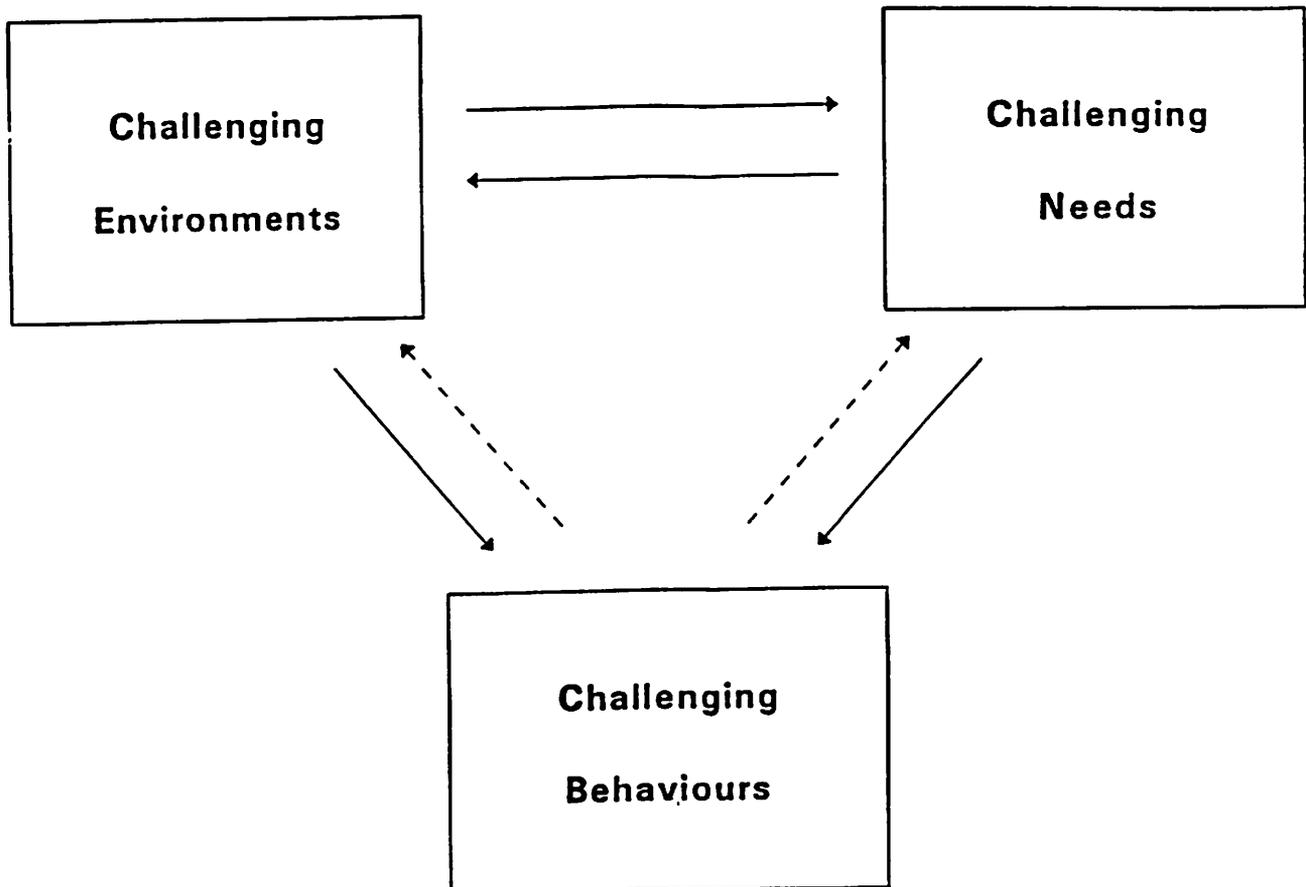

Figure 1.

Table 1. Hypothetical relationships between behavioural, environmental and individual characteristics

Behaviour maintained by	Environment characterized by	Individual characterized by
Escape or avoidance of aversive situations	Intermittently high levels of overt and covert social control and abuse	Limited comprehension or ability, history or failure
Increased social contact	Low levels of social contact	Need for unusual kind or amount of social contact
Adjustment of levels of sensory stimulation	Barrenness, low levels of stimulation	Need for unusual kind or amount of sensory stimulation
Increased access to preferred objects and activities	Regimes which rigidly control access to preferred objects or activities	Very few or unusual preferences

some environments than in others. In an environment geared up to providing a service to dependent people with multiple handicaps, mobility may well become a challenging need.

To be viable such a framework must be able to build on current knowledge and understanding. Despite considerable elaboration over the last 15 years, mainstream psychological explanation of challenging behaviour still derives largely from Carr's (1977) review. Challenging behaviour is seen as learned behaviour which can be understood by investigating the relationships between the behaviour, its antecedents and its consequences. Carr's paper led directly to the interest in functional analysis which developed through the 1980s. Work such as Iwata's (Iwata et al., 1982) demonstrated that challenging behaviour could serve different functions and, as the 1980s progressed, lists of the typical common functions began to emerge (e.g. Durand, 1990). Thus, challenging behaviour is now seen as most often serving four typical functions: attention, escape, tangible reinforcement, and sensory stimulation. How do such functions relate to the framework proposed here?

As Table 1 suggests, the functions which challenging behaviour most commonly serves are understandable as reflections of typical features of some service for people with learning disabilities (challenging environments), as individual features of some people with learning disabilities (challenging needs) or both. This framework provides a basis for understanding that behaviour is more likely in certain kinds of environments and in certain kinds of people, but

does not fall prey to the trap of assuming that certain environmental or individual characteristics will automatically lead to challenging behaviour.

What implications or uses does this framework have for good practice with individuals? While there are many, I want to focus here on the implications for models of individual "treatment".

Individual treatment has had only limited success. By far the most popular treatment of challenging behaviour is medication. The effectiveness of such medication has yet to be demonstrated. The second most popular treatment has been the use of a behavioural approach. While there is considerable evidence of short term effectiveness with a wide range of individuals, the behavioural approach remains largely unimplemented and has proved disappointing in terms of maintenance and generalization. Many other treatments (gentle teaching, psychotherapy, massage, etc.) proliferate as we look for quick fixes to the problem.

There are no quick fixes. The above framework suggests what might need to be done to overcome challenging behaviour:

■ We need to modify the challenging environment. Most treatment has been and remains individually based. Even behavioural approaches, which are allegedly about changing the environment, all too often focus on changing only the client's immediate environment, for example, by attending to appropriate behaviour. If the environment remains one in which attention is an extremely

limited commodity, such an approach will be a temporary, artificial one which leaves the system untouched in the longer term. The framework provides some ideas about the sort of environment which needs to be created. In the reverse of a challenging environment (a supportive environment) we shall see support and assistance instead of demand and control, high rates of social contact contingent on adaptive behaviour, meaningful activities instead of a lack of stimulation, and materials and activities which are readily and predictably available.

■ We need to meet challenging needs. This will include providing the best treatment available for sensory, physical and psychological impairments, but will also mean increasing the skills, especially communications skills, and abilities of people to exercise choice and control in their own lives.

■ We need to match individual needs to the demands and expectations of the environment. This will include the sorts of more specific behavioural strategies that have been used in the past, such as differential reinforcement, but will also mean attending to the special needs for certain sorts of environments which some people have. While we can describe in general terms the nature of both challenging environments and challenging needs, there are, clearly, some individuals who appear to have unusual needs and to respond unusually to typical environments. For example, people labelled "autistic" may sometimes seek to avoid social contact such that an environment which provides high levels of social contact - and which would therefore be helpful to most people - is actually challenging for them.

Clements identified a number of criteria against which a conceptual framework for understanding challenging behaviour and guiding interventions should be evaluated. How does the above framework fare when considered in this light?

Mainstream psychology

The framework is essentially a special case of a person-situation theory. Person-situation theories are a part of both "normal" psychology, in the understanding of personality and individual differences, and "abnormal" psychology - vulnerability-stress models of the development of psychological disorders. More fundamentally they

can be seen as the cornerstone of a genuinely psychological perspective. Without the person we are dealing with sociology, without the situation we are dealing with physiology, genetics or philosophy.

Extensive

The framework is, in its essence, about the "interplay of environmental and organismic factors" (Clements, 1992, p.30). It allows for the consideration of a wide range of independent variables which are not assumed, a priori, to operate in particular ways.

Generative

The framework has already, I think, proved to be generative in its broad implications for intervention. Thus, while a simple behavioural perspective stresses the effects of manipulation of contingencies on individual behaviour, the above framework suggests that interventions may also need to attend to the direct modification of the challenging environment or of challenging needs. It is worth noting that this directly implies the kind of multi-dimensional intervention strategies which have been described by, for example, La Vigna (La Vigna et al., 1989) and Evans (1989). To use La Vigna's terminology, "ecological manipulation" attends to the need to directly modify the environment (to make it less challenging). Similarly, "positive programming" attends to the need to meet challenging needs directly by giving people more skills in controlling their environment. The central problems of maintenance and generalization cannot be tackled by more and better "direct treatment", but only by more and better ecological manipulation and positive programming.

Clements also emphasized the importance of objective evaluation. There is nothing in the proposed framework that is antithetical to this, and its use with individuals would only produce results to the extent that the contributions of the challenging environment, challenging needs and their interactions can be clearly delineated and objectively evaluated.

Humanistic

The contribution of human relationships to changing challenging behaviour is clear. However effective our techniques, they have to be used by carers, in their interactions with clients, in the context of relationships. It may be that by

moving the focus from the specific behaviours and responses of carers, where misapplication has often led to implicit blaming ("don't you see that you're reinforcing her?"), the framework makes it easier to accept explanations of challenging behaviour which do not blame either the client or their carers.

Disseminable

I have used this framework both with staff who work directly with people with challenging behaviour and with service managers and professionals. Both groups have been able to take it on board and apparently find it useful. While it would be perfectly possible to dress the framework up in more academic clothes this is not a necessary feature for its use in practice.

John Clements has, I believe, raised issues of fundamental importance to psychological work with people with challenging behaviour. I share his optimism about the possibilities for the future, but would also emphasize the importance of help being provided now. People with challenging behaviour have suffered greatly from the worst abuses of both institutional care and our tendency to add further abuse in the name of treatment. As new private institutions develop, people with challenging behaviour are at great risk of missing the boat again and, instead of being deinstitutionalized, of being trans-institutionalized. While fundamental research on the causes of challenging behaviour is clearly necessary, it also seems important to demonstrate that we already know enough to provide most people with challenging behaviour with a significantly improved quality of life in community settings (see, for example, McGill et al., 1991). If even some people with challenging behaviour are to "survive" community care this kind of service development and support work is crucial. It

is also important from a more fundamental research perspective, since it is by investigating the variable responses of very different individuals in very different environments that we are likely to gain a more specific understanding of the mechanisms underlying the relationships between challenging behaviour, the environment and individual needs.

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