



Still behaviourist after all these years: health promotion words and deeds

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August 2009



Introduction

- Much evidence that it's more effective to address social determinants of health (SDH) than tell individuals to change their behaviour
- Successes (tobacco, HIV/AIDS, road crash deaths) due to a mix of regulation, public policies & public education/debate
- But Aust hp programs & policies generally focus on individual behaviour



Examples

- Measure Up
- NSW Get Healthy Information and Coaching Service
- National Primary Health Care Strategy
- National Health & Hospitals Reform

National Preventative Health Task Force – a more complex analysis.



Why do behavioural approaches persist?

- Many reasons (Raphael, 2008)
- This paper explores the role of language and particular keywords in hp methodology
- Words are the fundamental tools of hp, so the keywords warrant attention.



Language and keywords

- ‘Taken-for-granted’ words - their underlying concepts and values remain unexamined
- Implicit ‘frames’ that surround and underlie words, and influence interpretation and use (Lakoff, 2005)
- Raymond Williams: *Keywords* (2nd edition, 1983).



Keywords- central to specific bodies of knowledge

- Words can have a range of meanings, due to their historical development and use over time
- Words that involve important ideas and strong values are prone to transformation and different interpretations
- Certain uses of words bind together certain ways of seeing the world.



Keywords in health promotion

- Behaviour
- Target
- Message

The paper will consider the definition/s of these keywords, and their underlying assumptions and implications of their use.



Behaviour

Defns: a way of acting, to conduct oneself properly. Behaviourism- the study of observable responses.

- Separates the observer and the doer of the actions
- Observation rather than understanding
- Bits of behaviour removed from the continuity of action
- Looks at individuals not the determinants of actions (the tip, not the iceberg)
- Language of behaviour masks the issue of agency - who does what, and why?



Target

Defns: to shoot at, to reach for a goal, an object of scorn.

- Lack of reciprocity
- Targeting 'looks at', but also 'looks away from', or disregards



Message

Defns: information transmitted through an agent, the meaning intended to be conveyed, the implied moral.

- Limits programs to information provision
- Meanings of messages-ambiguities of interpretation
- Messages for all – uniform rather than diverse.



Ways of seeing: concept of 'the gaze'

- 'medical gaze'- separated the patient's body from their identity, enabling medicine to look into and intervene in the body (Armstrong, 2001)
- narrowed its focus to the body's constituent parts, and became the main way of seeing in health (Porter, 2003)
- 'behavioural gaze'- separates pieces of behaviour from the person, and the person from society



Behaviour+target+message=reinforced effect,
resulting in programs focused on:

- Individuals not organisations or governments
- Bits of behaviour not context
- Particular target groups and not others
- Information messages, not a broader mix of strategies



Conclusions

- These keywords reinforce the behavioural gaze, and narrow the way of seeing
- They are not suitable tools for hp, as they have little capacity to address SDH, or to improve health for the whole population
- HP needs words that expand thinking, not reduce the focus

.....but other words are possible.



An alternative vocabulary

- Behave – act, or a specific verb
- Target (v) – focus on, include, be for
- Target group (n) – intended participants, groups to benefit
- Message – program goal, desired outcome, program intent, information.



Finally

- The words do matter- choose with care!
- People can be sources of knowledge, and participants in public debate, instead of targets
- Different words in hp may stimulate new thoughts and deeds.