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TELEVISION VIEW

TELEVISION VIEW; A Few Scary Pictures Can Go a Long Way

By Walter Goodman

ON MARCH 3 THE CBS NEWS magazine "Eye to Eye With Connie Chung" cast a critical look at the Behavior Research Institute of Providence, R.I., which, in its 22 years of existence, has been both attacked and applauded for its use of "aversive treatment" for young people severely afflicted with autism.

The report (which had been scheduled earlier but was bumped by Ms. Chung's Tonya Harding coup) was not made available in advance for review, with the usual explanation that editing was going on right up to showtime. It invites attention after the fact for what it reveals about the way television professionals can punch up a story and propel it in a desired direction.

Dr. Matthew L. Israel, the institute's executive director, was a disciple of the behaviorist B.F. Skinner at Harvard University. Those whom Dr. Israel calls clients or students come, he says, from "that very small percentage of developmentally disabled individuals who bang their heads to the point of brain damage, gouge out their eyes or engage in other forms of life-threatening mutilation and aggression." To discourage such doings, he uses a combination of rewards, in the form of pennies and snacks, and punishments, particularly brief but painful electric shocks.

"Eye to Eye" noted the rewards but concentrated on the punishments, relaying charges from former staff members and others that "aversives" are being used excessively, perhaps needlessly. There were intimations of systematic abuse.

This was not the institute's first appearance on national television. In 1985, as now, the school was under pressure from Massachusetts authorities (a number of the institute's patients are from Massachusetts, and the state contributes to their expensive upkeep). ABC's "Nightline" carried interviews in November of that year with Dr. Israel; with another psychologist, who strenuously opposed his techniques, and with a couple who described how their son had been helped by the

treatment after years of unavailing efforts elsewhere. The parents' account of their long ordeal left a favorable impression of the institute as a place of last resort.

In August 1986, "20/20," also on ABC, carried an even more favorable report, titled "When All Else Fails." But since then some disaffected former employees have come forward with horror stories. And judging from the comments of an "Eye to Eye" producer who visited the school and the attitude of Ms. Chung when she went to Providence in August, Dr. Israel and his staff sensed that this encounter with the cameras would be less agreeable. They launched a pre-emptive strike. They filmed Ms. Chung's entire five-hour interview with Dr. Israel, which took place before an audience of supportive parents who rallied to him. Then the institute sent television reviewers and others a show of its own: 30 minutes of excerpts, most of which were not shown on "Eye to Eye."

Dr. Israel asserts that "Eye to Eye" arrived with a prejudice against aversive therapy, taking its lead from a very few naysayers among parents and former staff members, as well as antagonists in the Massachusetts Legislature and other state bodies. The institute tape, which managed to make Ms. Chung look positively sinister, was itself no model of fairness. But it did show her using aversive journalistic techniques, like repeating a question over and over, that seemed to be aimed less at eliciting information than at getting crunchy sound bites or perhaps discomfiting Dr. Israel and provoking a reaction that would make him look bad on screen.

WATCHING THE TAPE OF the entire interview session confirms that Ms. Chung was playing cross-examiner. Most of her questions, which she read from a script presumably prepared by a producer, echoed charges that Dr. Israel and his associates were overusing harsh methods of dubious value.

Dr. Israel seemed evasive at times, notably about his failure to publish scientific papers on his work and the number of electric shocks delivered to recalcitrant patients. He conceded only under pressure from Ms. Chung that while one shock a day is average, a few youths receive as many as 100 or 200 a day. He dismissed most of the criticisms as coming from disgruntled, unstable or philosophically unsympathetic sources.

But for the most part he was responsive. When an answer required some elaboration or became a touch complicated, however, Ms. Chung did not seem especially interested. She listened politely but rarely followed up and returned as soon as she could to her complaint list.

In an unbroadcast exchange that revealed how script-bound Ms. Chung was, she took Dr. Israel sharply to task for rebutting one of his unseen accusers -- a woman who told "Eye to Eye" that the institute had failed her son. When Dr. Israel produced a letter from that woman, expressing her gratitude for what he had done for the boy, Ms. Chung turned on him, as if he had ruined a good scene.

Like many stories, this one lends itself to message by image. If you want to argue for the benefits of aversive therapy, you can play up pictures of untreated children in the throes of stunningly violent tantrums or show them being drugged into stupefaction in mental hospitals.

Children battering themselves, as shown on a separate institute tape called "Before and After," are hard to watch, but hope is offered in the "after" scenes of the same youths, now subdued and cooperative, apparently as a result of treatment. Such pictures, as Ms. Chung pointed out in her conversation with Dr. Israel and on her program, are unreliable, since the children's moods can swing dramatically.

Still, Dr. Israel claims a high degree of success in enabling his patients to get along without drugs or constraints and even to do some sort of work when they leave. He won the support of the "20/20" report, which led off with success stories and showed a staff member praising a student for carrying out a task. Then the correspondent, Lynn Sherr, noted the gradually more severe punishments, from a fine to a spank or pinch to worse, and critics were heard from. But at the end, she returned to the relatively happy endings.

A very different message comes through if you set up the claims of success as a target for an attack on the methods. If that is your aim, you can focus on the two-second jolt inflicted by what Ms. Chung called "Matthew Israel's homemade shock device" or even more painful pictures from the institute's past, for example of children in helmets that call to mind The Man in the Iron Mask, being subjected to whiffs of ammonia. Then the impression is one of near torture, especially if they are presented in slow motion.

So, what course was taken by "Eye to Eye"? The first 10 minutes of the program could have been a reprise of "20/20," with its testimonials from parents, pictures of youths receiving treats for desired behavior and Dr. Israel's claims of achievements. But Ms. Chung's promise of "dark allegations" was fulfilled in the next 23 minutes, which were dominated by strong criticisms, including the charge that Dr. Israel himself had twice lost control and had to be restrained from a fit of smacking children with a rubber spatula, the institute's tool of choice for spanking. Viewers were left to choose between the vivid charges and the soft-spoken denials by Dr. Israel, who seemed startled and taken aback.

The program's most striking elements, the images that stay with one, were glimpses through a hidden camera of an especially unmanageable young man in "four-point restraint," his arms and legs tied to a board. (The hidden camera was used because parents had refused permission for CBS to film their children.) These fuzzy black-and-white scenes, with otherworldly sounds that seemed borrowed from old Saturday serials, produced a creepy effect that, given the know-how of the producers, must have been intentional.

(Elsewhere, scenes of the shock device at work, apparently provided by the institute, were broadcast in slow motion to a spooky sound. In one of the more original excuses of the television era, CBS News blamed the institute for the producers' use of these gimmicks. A CBS spokeswoman told The Boston Globe that the institute did not give the producers enough footage to fill the available time, so they had to "stretch what we had.")

Juxtaposed to such pictures and to the hot criticisms, Dr. Israel's truncated declarations of how proud he was of his accomplishments came across as bland, self-gratulating and unfeeling.

For sheer manipulation, there was the account of the death of a young institute patient in 1985. After running an interview with a police officer who suggested that the boy was killed by the helmet he had been obliged to wear, Ms. Chung pointed out (as she had earlier in the program) that a court ruled that the death was due to natural causes. Nevertheless, the segment climaxed in a close-up of the boy's mother declaring tearfully, "To his mother he was murdered" -- the second time this affecting moment was used.

The report's windup consisted largely of findings by the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation of instances of abuse and neglect at the institute and the claims of a nonbehaviorist psychologist of success with nonaversive therapy. Upbeat music punctuated the declaration of a former institute resident that he was doing better elsewhere. People who put their trust in CBS News and Ms. Chung are likely to have come away amazed that an operation like the institute has been allowed to work its will on young people for more than 20 years.

Sick children are among the most television-friendly of subjects: If they are being helped, good; if they are being hurt, even better for a moving story. But the issue of aversive treatment, though it invites the camera's attention, resists easy conclusions, and uncertainty or ambiguity does not make for a powerful expose.

"Eye to Eye" cannot be faulted for raising questions about whether the Behavior Research Institute is doing a worthy job; the main pros and cons were delivered. But the pressures to make a stronger show (the network competition is "Seinfeld") inspired shabby tricks of the trade; the evidence was hyped, the case loaded, the institute's reputation probably damaged, viewers possibly misled. Such are the temptations inherent in the newsmagazine form.

Photos: On a segment titled "Shock Value," the CBS program "Eye to Eye With Connie Chung" described a Rhode Island institute's treatment of autistic children like the one shown at lower left, hitting himself. The segment focused on the institute's punishment therapies: arm and leg restraints, at upper left; mild shock devices, at upper right; and a helmet that covers eyes and ears, at center right. (CBS)(pg. 28); Manacles to restrain children at the Behavior Research Institute. (CBS)(pg. 34)