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McConnell and the Media: Is Publicity Worth Scaring the Public?
Mark Rilling
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Looking down at us from his final resting place in Worm Runner’s Paradise, I think that James McConnell would have been generally pleased with my coverage of his career (Rilling, June 1996). I know that he would have been delighted with the photograph of the pink planarian on the cover of the June 1996 issue of the American Psychologist.

With respect to the ethics of McConnell’s media work, I (Rilling, 1996) used his own words so that readers could draw their own conclusions. My conclusion that McConnell was using the media for claims about the efficacy of behavior modification programs that never would have stood up to the test of peer review was validated by a letter I received from Robert Isaacson (personal communication, July 13, 1996) in response to my article. Isaacson, a professor and colleague of McConnell in the Department of Psychology at the University of Michigan, wrote as follows:

There is no question that some members of the media encouraged Jim to overstate the significance of some of his studies. There is no doubt, however, that Jim actually encouraged them with his overgeneralizations and fantasies made “off stage.” He played to the media. I think, in fact, he abused his access to the media by going beyond acceptable conduct for a scientist. Many of us discussed this with him from time to time but without noticeable effect.

McKeachie chaired the Department of Psychology at the University of Michigan during the time when McConnell was involved with behavior modification. I agree with McKeachie (1997, this issue) that McConnell was not malevolent. Make no mistake, I think that McConnell deserves to be remembered as a great psychologist because of the publicity he generated for the profession. However, he was willing to use scare tactics in the media to draw the attention of the public to his ideas. He knew what he was doing. McConnell received many letters in response to his 1970 editorial, “Criminals Can Be Brainwashed—Now,” in Psychology Today. In 1970, in a response to one of these letters, he wrote, “For the most part, the people who wrote were frightened by what I had to say—as well they might have been [italics added]—and resented my saying such things in public” (J. V. McConnell, personal communication, April 2, 1970).

I hope my article (Rilling, 1996) stimulates historians of psychology to work on the colorful story of behavior modification during the 1960s and 1970s.

REFERENCES


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Arguments for Prescription Privileges for Psychologists

David Hines
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The Current Issues: Prescription Privileges section (March 1996) presented a number of well-reasoned arguments for and against prescription privileges for psychologists. Like Klein (March 1996), I am a clinical psychologist who teaches both graduate students in clinical psychology and medical residents. However, I teach family practice residents rather than psychiatry residents. The family practice experience is relevant to the current debate, because family practice physicians prescribe more psychotherapeutic drugs than do psychiatrists. Indeed, primary care physicians prescribe more than 80% of the psychotherapeutic drug scripts (DeLeon & Wiggins, March 1996). There are three points