THE "OBJECTIVE-BEHAVIORAL" ENVIRONMENT OF ISIDOR CHEIN

In Memory of a Humanistic Scientist

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ABSTRACT: Isidor Chein was committed to the development of a unified science of human behavior. His observations of behavior led him to stress the importance of two somewhat paradoxical facts: (1) that persons were active agents whose behavior was directed at the *perceived* environment and (2) that all behavior had to be understood in the context of the *objective* environment. This article discusses why Chein chose to stress the objective environment and how he managed to describe objective environmental forces in a way that still allowed for the personal freedom and responsibility of active agents. It shows how his conception of an "objective-behavioral" environment accounts for the tremendous impact of the environment on contranormative behavior yet does not excuse delinquents, or us, from responsibility for that behavior.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Isidor Chein died on April 18, 1981. This article on Chein's conception of the social environment, together with a paper by John Harding on Chein's conception of the person, substituted for what would have been his Presidential Address to the Division of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology at the 1982 convention of the American Psychological Association.*

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As a junior faculty member at New York University, I used to spend hours a day talking with Is Chein. I was in full rebellion at the behaviorism I had learned at Yale and Stanford and was determined to study human feelings and to isolate myself from the constraining influence of academic psychology. Is handled me as an expert angler lands a game fish. I would argue for defining a new psychology in terms of human experience, for the importance of emotion, and for choices of ways of being. Is would listen attentively and hear me out. Then he would speak of the primacy of behavior, the importance of intentional activity, and the impact of the objective environment. By respecting me yet still remaining faithful to his own vision, he broadened my scope of inquiry—encouraging me to relate to the rest of psychology yet (by his own example) inspiring me to be true to my own vision.

On the one hand, Isidor Chein was a scientist, a philosophical realist who saw science as an "efficient master chart . . . designed to be helpful in negotiating a passage through the world" (Chein, 1972: 332). He was committed to a unified science of human behavior and consistently opposed splits within psychology and between psychology and the other biological and social sciences. As a psychologist, he struggled to construct a systematic and parsimonious theory that would help us comprehend the important facts that we observe when we look at human behavior.

On the other hand, Chein was a humanist. He wanted to construct a science that would deal with real human beings in the process of conducting the important affairs of their lives. When he observed persons, he did not see drive reducing, dissonance reducing reactors. He saw active agents who bore some responsibility for their behavior, for who they were, and for what they were becoming. He could hardly comprehend such creatures in terms of computer programs. He saw programmers. Therefore, on his scientific map, he charted persons as organized systems of activities. He construed a person to *be* a developing set of interdependent long-range projects of action that used the body to accomplish the ends to which the person was committed.

But although this "image of man" portrays persons as having a degree of freedom (actualized whenever the person's own motives determine behavior), it does not by any means portray persons as independent of their surroundings. For one thing, Chein defined activity as always directed towards some object. Hence, the person-system was always in transaction with objects in the environment (Chein, 1972: 180). He noted that motives are not, in themselves, sufficient to determine behavior, because behavior is also dependent on the person's apprehension of the behavioral situation (Chein, 1972: 275). Further, because one behavior may operate to motivate another behavior, the assessment of the situation implicit in the first behavior plays a role in the generation of subsequent motives.

Given the interdependence of motivation and perceived environment and Chein's awareness of persons as active agents whose behavior is always in transaction with the environment, one might suppose that when he turned to describe the environment Chein would either describe a personal, perceived environment (such as von Uexkull's "Umvelt" or Koffka's "behavioral environment") or choose a unit of analysis (such as Lewin's lifespace) that includes whatever aspects of the environment influence a particular person's behavior.

Instead, Chein elects to describe an *objective* environment. To be sure, it is not the sort of environment in which a physicist or biologist would be interested; it is the environment of a psychologist who is interested in predicting and comprehending behavior. Yet it is an environment independent of the perception or behavior of any particular person, an environment that may be objectively described by an observer.

THE OBJECTIVE BEHAVIORAL ENVIRONMENT

Building on the work of Tolman and Lewin, Chein (1954) suggested that an "objective behavioral environment" could

be described by specifying five general features of the environment:

(1) The distribution of behavioral *instigators*—stimuli that may initiate specific activities—such as handguns, pornographic pictures, invitations to cultural events, and so forth. Some environments evoke more aggression, sex, fear, patriotism, or religion than others; some are overstimulating, others understimulating.
(2) The relative presence (or absence) of *goal objects* that can satisfy different needs—the availability of cars, books, sexual partners—and *noxients* that produce pain or displeasure—noise, smog, and so forth. Some environments provide a plenitude of goals, whereas others require that a high percentage of behavior be directed toward reaching a limited class of goals.
(3) The presence or absence of behavioral *supports* (including the cues and means-end paths that facilitate behavior) and *constraints* (including barriers—such as discriminating quotas and absence of information—and false paths that mislead persons). Chein notes how in some environments the routes to goal objects are individualistic and competitive; in others the routes are collective and cooperative.
(4) *Global* features, such as the overall difficulty of an environment—the amount of security and degrees of freedom it provides, its degree of organization and stability.
(5) The existence of "directors" of behavior, such as the positioning of means-end paths (e.g., in a given environment what does one have to do to become a doctor?) and, above all, social norms and attitudinal climates that control the availability and perceptibility of supports and steer behavior in certain directions rather than others (toward violence or compassion, toward selfishness or love).

Chein focused almost all of his subsequent work on this last aspect of the objective environment—the prevailing norms and the potency of these norms to control behavior. However, he notes "simply keeping (all the aspects) in mind enhances my sensitivity to the environments of my fellow human beings and is of material assistance in helping me to predict their behavior and to understand why they are what they are and why they do what they do, the commonplace as well as the unusual" (Chein, 1954: 126).

Although Chein never discusses "behavior-settings" and focuses on the social rather than the physical environment, he is clearly concerned with describing the same sort of ecological environment described by Roger Barker. Thus, in speaking about the prevailing culture of a neighborhood, he notes that the "linkages of ideas, attitudes, values . . . are as much an aspect of the geography of the behavioral environments of individuals as the streets, alleyways, and bridges are of their physical environments" (Chein et al., 1964).

Now why did Chein make this theoretical choice and elect to describe an objective, sociological environment for his very psychological person (with his or her enduring sets of motives) to behave in? I believe it was because he was committed to the unity of the social sciences and the comprehensive mapping of *all* of the important features of behavioral reality and, just as he could not ignore human freedom, he could not ignore environmental impact. *The Road to H* (Chein et al., 1964), a book about heroin addiction, points out that 15% of the census tracts in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Queens—containing 29% of the 16- to 20-year-old males—yield 83% of the youth addicted to heroin. Chein wanted a theory that would take note of such obvious facts. He consistently refused to put parsimony ahead of interesting data, and he chose to formulate a somewhat disjointed theory rather than to ignore empirical observations and common sense.

THE DESCRIPTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL DIRECTORS

IMPERSONAL SOCIETAL STRUCTURES OR NEIGHBORHOOD NORMS?

We now come to a second critical theoretical choice that Chein makes. It would be possible to describe an objective behavioral environment that is *impersonal* and to isolate directors that predict individual behavior on an actuarial basis. In a sense, this is what Robert Merton does when he attempts to account for delinquency in terms of an objective societal structure that he calls "anomic." According to Merton's view, the anomic society fosters certain goals in its members—the

acquisition of cars, fancy clothes, and positions of power—but does not provide everyone with the means to achieve these possessions and statuses in normative ways. Hence, individuals who lack the means must either adopt illegitimate means (becoming delinquents) or retreat from the approved ends and turn to drugs.

In this view, "anomie" really refers to an *individual's* psychological state, a disrespect for norms that is generated by the objective opportunity structure of a society. In such a view, poverty contributes directly to delinquency, because it leads to an absence of legitimate means; and those individuals who lack the means are the ones most likely to become delinquents. This image presents the societal environment as an impersonal *cause* of contra-normative behavior, with the deprived individual having little choice or responsibility.

Merton's image leads us to blame society for delinquency. After all, if society has led individuals to aspire to material goals and then has not provided legitimate means to reach them, what is an individual to do but deviate from the normative path? The impersonal objective environment is really the cause of the delinquency, and we should not blame its victims. Yet most of us rebel a bit at this analysis. We all know of some well-to-do persons who succumb to temptation and deviate in order to get more of what society values and of other persons who manage to stay honest in spite of the poverty in which they grow up. In a backlash of insistence on the importance of personal integrity we may tend to dismiss the importance of environment—it cannot matter *that* much if personal integrity and motivation are to have a place in how we lead our own lives.

For Chein, both the environment and individual freedom are of paramount importance. On the one hand, the environment *does* matter and all individual behavior must be understood in its context. On the other hand, individuals *are* responsible for their behavior. He must, then, find a conceptualization of the environment that is objective and determinate and yet will permit the possibility of responsibility. Chein finds this in Durkheim's concept of the community and its norms. By and large, conventional and constructive

values prevail within any well-functioning community. Thus, the desirability of education, health, constructive activity, and not hurting other persons are normative attitudes held by most members of the community. How, then, does one account for delinquency and other contranormative behavior? Rather than accepting Merton's view of impersonal factors that cause the individual to feel anomie and act delinquently, Chein takes Durkheim's view that anomie is a normlessness that is a property of social environment.

From this perspective, a community with anomie has an objective climate of normlessness toward which an individual will respond in his or her own way. Thus, some social environments will objectively be less able to encourage normative behavior, yet the individual still bears responsibility. The individual's behavior must be understood as a *response*, made in the context of the social environment of a neighborhood, rather than as a *reaction* to an impersonal structure of society. The crucial social question then becomes the same one that Shaw and McKay (1942) asked when they studied delinquency in Chicago over 40 years ago—what are the objective conditions under which a community loses its ability to regulate behavior, loses its capacity to command respect for its norms?

Note that in this view, objective conditions—such as poverty or the ratio of adults to children—do not have a direct effect on the individual but do have an effect on the neighborhood norms with which the individual must then cope.

How does an impersonal variable such as poverty affect norms? In part, societal norms acquire their potency by helping persons achieve their individual goals. When there is widespread poverty, the norms lack instrumentality. They do not help people achieve their goals, so a lack of respect for the norms develops. This is not so much an individual phenomenon as the development of a social climate to which every person in the neighborhood will then be exposed. Although some families will still subscribe to conventional values, others will give only lip service to the norms, which will no longer influence how they actually behave. And subgroups

will spring up—such as delinquent gangs—who will actually hold to norms to which no civilized society could subscribe.

Now any given adolescent may actually come from one of the relatively better-off homes in the neighborhood, but as soon as he steps out the door he encounters what Chein called the "delinquent's world view"—that parents cannot be counted on, that police can be paid off, that police pick on people without reason and favor their friends, that most people would be better off if they were never born, that everybody is just out for himself or herself. Nobody really cares about anybody else, so the most important thing is to be able to get other people to do what you want and to have lots of thrills. Chein established that in high-delinquency neighborhoods at least 25% of the boys held such attitudes by the time they were in the eighth grade (Chein et al., 1964: 91-95). In his view, it was this pervasive social climate—"that people do not respect other people, that they are mean and arbitrary in the pursuit of their private ends"—that was the most important feature of the environment contributing to contranormative behavior. All other (I will call them "impersonal") variables operate by influencing the neighborhood's social climate.

To demonstrate the validity of conceiving of the environment in this objective yet personal way, Chein undertook a truly herculean investigation. He studied 1,427 census tracts of New York City, working with hundreds of variables from both the 1950 and the 1960 census (Chein, 1969). He wanted to be able to use his data as a statistical control to evaluate the impact that public housing projects and other environmental actions had on contranormative behavior. And he wanted to accurately conceptualize the epidemiology of delinquency. As he noted, "our immediate goal is not to improve prediction in the sense of blind forecasts—that is what ordinary regression analysis procedure generally and at best leads to— but to get a clearer and more comprehensible picture of what was going on in a particular social area during a given time span" (Chein, 1969: 5).

To achieve an intelligible picture, he introduced a number of creative innovations so that the meaning of his variables would always be conceptually clear.

First, he carefully developed measures that accurately reflected distinct conceptualizations. For example, using multiple regression equations he created a measure of a neighborhood's "economic deprivation" by combining the percentage of men unemployed with the percentage of households with an income of under $2,000 a year. He then combined this newly created variable (of economic deprivation) with the percentage of overcrowded dwelling units to create a measure of "socioeconomic squalor." Second, in his final multiple regression equations he never used more than two variables and always kept the variables in conceptually distinct domains. (For example, he might have combined his measure of socioeconomic squalor with a measure of disrupted family life but not with another economic measure.) These techniques both avoided multicollinearity and enabled him to isolate the conceptual meaning of the different variables that he created. Thus, he could see how much variance could be accounted for by different conceptualizations. He could test hypotheses rather than simply establish empirical predictions.

Further, because Chein had data from both the 1950 and the 1960 census he could see if there were any regional influences that persistently affected behavior *independently* of all his other variables. Thus, over the years he could see if some regions persisted in having more or less delinquency than one would predict by knowing the extent of the regions' socioeconomic squalor, disrupted family life, and so forth. Chein showed that there were such regional differences and argued that these suggested the existence of *traditions* of norms or normlessness in different regions.

Although he never fully completed the analysis of his data, he did establish a number of effects that lend credence to his approach to understanding the environment (Chein, 1967). I have summarized a very few of his findings in Table 1. Reasoning from his findings, he developed four arguments.

First, living near areas of high industrial activity exposes the residents of the neighborhood to a large floating population that has no vested interest in the neighborhood. Hence, we might expect a weakened sense of community and an impo-

TABLE 1
Correlations Between Measures of Objective Environment and Contranormative Behavior in 1,427 Census Tracts in New York City

	Delinquency	Dropouts	Illegitimacy	Syphilis
Industrial proximity	.46	.50	.39	.45
Social contrast	.51	.38	.37	.29
Youth density	.55	.28	.45	.45
Disrupted families	.80	.50	.91	.72
Socio-economic squalor	.81	.60	.77	.62
All above variables	.86	.63	.92	.73

SOURCE: Abstracted from Chein (1967).

tent normative system. Working with the 1,427 census tracts, Chein showed that in 1960 such industrial activity correlated .46 with the amount of delinquency, .50 with teenagers dropping out of school, .39 with illegitimate childbirths, and .45 with the amount of syphilis.

Second, the simultaneous presence of families from different levels of the socioeconomic continuum is likely to bring inconsistent normative systems into the neighborhood. This exposes individuals to competing social norms and possibly weakens their respect for all norms. Chein found that the extent of social contrast correlates .51 with delinquency, .38 with school dropout, .37 with illegitimacy, and .29 with syphilis.

Third, norms are exemplified and enforced by adults; the greater the relative numbers of youth, the more difficult it becomes to maintain the normative structure. Chein found that the density of the youthful cohort correlates .55 with delinquency, .28 with school dropout, .45 with illegitimacy, and .45 with syphilis.

Fourth, because families transmit norms, the more disrupted the family life of the neighborhood, the less potent the societal normative system will be. Using a set of indices of family disruption, Chein established multiple correlates of .80 with delinquency, .50 with school dropout, .91 with illegitimacy, and .7 with syphilis.

Of course, these different variables, along with the socioeconomic variables (which Chein saw as influencing the availability of rewards for compliance with the normative systems), are not statistically independent; and—as noted above—his analytic goal was to separate out these different influences. By combining conceptually distinct sets of variables, he was able to achieve a correlation of .86 with delinquency! That is, Chein could actually account for 74% of the variance in delinquency in the 1,427 census tracts of New York City.

It is important to remember that Chein was attempting to describe the objective behavioral environment of the neighborhood and was showing the impact that its social climate has on the contranormative behaviors of its inhabitants. He is *not* using his environmental measures to predict directly the behavior of individuals. Let us contrast his approach with Merton's.

If Merton's view of anomie were correct, then we might expect that the more socially disadvantaged individuals would be more likely to become delinquents. It would follow that the percentage of youth not living with both their parents (coming from disrupted homes) would correlate with the amount of contranormative behavior in the census tract. And this percentage does correlate .66 with delinquency, .31 with school dropout, .71 with illegitimate childbirth, and .54 with syphilis.

However, if Chein's conceptualization is correct, then the amount of contranormative behavior would be even better predicted by the number of broken homes in the neighborhood—regardless of whether the youth of the neighborhood were coming from those particular homes. The number of broken homes in the neighborhood is best measured by the percentage of married women not living with their husbands (or the percentage of married men not living with their wives), and either of these variables is more highly correlated with contranormative behavior than is the percentage of youth from broken homes.

In fact, Table 2 shows that much more of the variance in contranormative behavior can be accounted for by knowing

TABLE 2
Percentage of Variance of Contranormative Behavior in 1,427 Census Tracts Accounted for by the Prevalence of Youth Living in Broken Homes Versus the Prevalence of Disrupted Marriage

	Delinquency	Dropouts	Illegitimacy	Syphilis
% of youth not living with both parents	44	10	50	29
% married women not living with husbands	69	22	83	48

SOURCE: Abstracted from Chein (1967).

the number of disrupted homes in the neighborhood rather than by knowing the number of individual youths living in disrupted homes. That is, Durkheim's view of anomie appears to be more useful than Merton's, and Chein may be correct in his view that objective variables are best understood by conceiving of them as factors that affect both the social climate of neighborhoods and the ability of neighborhoods to command respect for societal norms.

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

What of the individual youth growing up in a neighborhood with high socioeconomic squalor and many disrupted homes? He or she will confront an objective environment with anomic properties—the environment will not clearly direct him or her in what should be done. There will, of course, be islands of opportunity (if one has certain abilities, one may find a niche in the school system) and currents of legitimate activities that may sweep one into safety (there are some jobs). But the waters are filled with delinquent gangs that seek membership and can confer status, with companions who offer heroin, and with general attitudes of hopelessness and cynicism. In such an environment, some individuals will be able to reject the normlessness of the neighborhood, stay away from the gangs and the delinquent world view, and formulate a plan of escape; but others (and these will often

lack the adequate guidance of fathers) will succumb. In either case, Chein notes that there is "quite a difference . . . between the situation of a youth who must struggle against his environment and that of the youth who does not need to struggle in order to find wholesome personal and social fulfillment" (Chein, 1967).

Given Chein's conceptualization of the environment we might ask: Is the delinquent person or is society responsible for delinquent behavior? On the one hand, Chein still holds the individual responsible for his behavior. He is opposed to those programs for delinquents that "sow the seeds of their future disappointment and discouragement by unrealistic and exaggerated sympathy for the delinquent as a victim . . . [who] . . . cannot be restored to normalcy by procedures that ignore what he has become" (Chein et al., 1964: 367). On the other hand, he holds that as members of the society *we* also bear a responsibility for establishing healthy environments. When we control inflation by measures that increase unemployment, create a black market for heroin rather than using the medical establishment to control its use, or build a highway through the middle of a neighborhood, we contribute to the anomie of some of our living regions. Reflecting a sense of this responsibility, Chein (1957) once wrote a grant that proposed an entire series of environmental interventions designed to modify the social reality of a neighborhood in a manner that would enable its youth to discover some authority figures who respected them as persons, who cared enough about their future to provide the encouragement and opportunity to learn normative activities.

This proposal was never funded (I am not sure of the details of its rejection), yet Chein's attitude and approach remain a possibility for the future. They are, somehow, embodied for me in one of his behaviors. I was walking with Is to the subway by the seamier side of New York University, when one of the multitudes of alcoholics who frequent the Bowery staggered over to us. I did not know what to do in this situation (wanting to respond to a fellow human yet being unwilling to provide an environmental support for another binge), so I looked the

other way and was prepared to walk on. But Is stopped and faced the derelict, who asked if he could have a quarter. Is looked directly at him and said, "No." Then he added, "but would you like to have a cigarette with me?" (Smoking was one of Is's only vices—and he took full responsibility for it.) The man then looked at Is and softly said, "Yes, I would." As the three of us huddled briefly together the derelict looked over at me. "Your friend," he said, nodding at Is, "he understands."

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