

The Analysis of Perseverative Mands Maintained by Access to Tangible

Molly Coyle, Katherine Hurlock and Frances Perrin | Bancroft

Introduction

Research in perseveration has indicated that this verbal behavior is maintained by social attention (Rehfeldt, R.A. & Chambers, M.R.; 2003). However, when exploring the verbal operant of the perseveration, the function may appear differently. In particular, perseverative mands may have a tangible function (Ewing, C.B., Magee, S.K., & Ellis, J.; 2002). In addition, precursor behaviors can be integral when analyzing more severe problem behavior (Borrero, C.S. & Borrero, J.C.; 2008). The present study analyzed perseverative mands as a possible precursor to aggression within an access to tangible condition.

METHOD

Participants

The participant in this study was a 16-year old male who resided in a short-term behavioral stabilization unit for the treatment of severe self-injury and aggression. This individual was diagnosed with Autism, ADHD, and Mental Retardation-NOS.

Setting and Materials

Sessions were conducted on the individualized unit in the dining room. Materials consisted of preferred tangible items and neutral tangible items.

Dependent Measures

Aggression and Perseveration were the two dependent measures in this study. Aggression was defined as kicking, biting, hitting, pinching, elbowing, pushing, spitting, head butting or throwing objects at others. Perseveration was defined as any occurrence of repeating the same request three or more times within a 5-minute period, after the initial request was addressed.

PROCEDURE

A previous functional analysis was conducted that concluded aggression was escape-maintained. However, ABC data indicated that aggressions along with perseverations were also maintained by access to tangible items.

Functional Analysis

A functional analysis was conducted with tangible and toy play conditions. During the tangible condition the participant sat in the dining room at a table with the therapist. The participant was exposed to a preferred item for one minute prior to the session starting. Once the session started the item was taken away but still visible to the participant. The participant was then handed a neutral item. The length of the sessions was initially 10 minutes and increased to 20 minutes after the first phase of the analysis.

During the first phase of the analysis perseverations were reinforced with the tangible item and aggressions were ignored. During the second phase, aggressions were reinforced and perseverations were ignored. Throughout the entire analysis all other behaviors were ignored. The phases were replicated in an ABAB pairwise design. Toy play served as the control condition. The rates recorded during the toy play sessions were the combined inappropriate behaviors of aggression and perseveration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Across all phases perseveration was prevalent. During the first phase of the analysis perseveration ($M=.13$) was higher than aggression ($M=0$) and the rate during the toy play condition was zero. During the second phase aggression increased from the previous phase ($M=.13$) and rates of perseveration remained consistent ($M=.18$). Toy play continued to serve as a control ($M=.025$). Once the phases were repeated and perseveration was reinforced once again rates ($M=.32$) were higher than aggression ($M=.09$). Rates of target behavior during toy play remained low ($M=.01$). In the final phase rates of perseveration remained consistent ($M=.32$), however, aggression increased substantially ($M=2.33$). Rates of target behavior during toy play were slightly higher than the previous phases but still remained low ($M=.25$).

The results of this study indicated that when perseveration was reinforced rates of aggression were lower. However, once perseverations were placed on extinction and aggression was reinforced the rate of aggression increased. When perseveration was not reinforced the participant allocated responding to aggressive behaviors. Therefore, one possible option for treating aggression maintained by access to tangible items, is attending to perseverations. Currently, treatment sessions are being conducted to teach the participant to tolerate waiting after the initial request for the item.

Further research should focus on determining the function of verbal behavior in order to determine the appropriate form of treatment especially if specific verbal behavior serves as a precursor to a more severe aberrant behavior such as aggression.

