

Social Skills Training and Natural Contingencies

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The present case study describes teaching an eighteen year old female borstal trainee conversation skills, self monitoring to reduce lying, an assertion skill to reduce provocative peer statements, and the use of positive statements to increase appropriate staff and peer behaviour. A multiple baseline design across three target behaviours (lying, argument and positive statements) was employed to evaluate treatment effects. Results indicated that all target behaviours changed rapidly and that these gains were maintained at a nine month follow-up. The results were discussed with reference to entering natural communities of reinforcement and the ecological approach to social deviance.

In the present study a borstal inmate was taught a series of social skills in an attempt to change her inappropriate behaviour. The client was referred to the author by the Classification Board of the institution, for the investigation of such behaviours as lying and arguing with both staff and other inmates. Treatment was begun after the client agreed that many of her current behaviours were maladaptive and that changing specific behaviours was highly desirable. The client was taught conversation skills (as outlined by Smith, 1975) to increase appropriate reinforcing peer interaction; the assertive skill "fogging" (Smith, 1975) to extinguish provocative peer statements and so reduce the frequency of arguments; the use of praise to increase appropriate staff and peer behaviour; and the use of self monitoring to reduce lying. The training was programmed not only to change the client's behaviour but also the behaviour of others in her environment (although these latter changes were not measured in the study). In this way an attempt was made to maintain behavioural changes by tapping a dormant but available natural community of reinforcers.

A multiple baseline design across three target behaviours (lying, arguing, and positive statements) (Baer, Wolf & Risley, 1968) was used. This design permitted a demonstration of the effects of the sequentially introduced treatment variables on the concurrently monitored target behaviours.

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Method

Subject

The subject was an eighteen year old female European who had made five court appearances involving charges of theft, false pretences, obtaining credit by fraud, breach of probation, misuse of a telephone and arson. The probation report noted that she had been dismissed from numerous jobs because of such nuisance behaviours as telling lies, spreading rumours, and absenteeism. Counselling by her Probation Officer had, by his own account, failed to alter her behaviour patterns of fantasy, threats and lies. A psychologist's report described the subject as "completely unrealistic in her approach to life". She was serving an indeterminate sentence of zero to two years, in an institution with 60 other female borstal trainees and prisoners.

Assessment

During the initial interview the following behavioural deficits were evidenced: little ability to listen to or show interest in others in conversation, few verbal resources to resist arguments, and no ability to praise or show appreciation of others. Lying and arguing were seen as behavioural excesses. The following assets were also noted: appropriate non-verbal social skills, a willingness to keep records of her behaviour, and recognition of the above behaviours as problems, concomitant with a desire to change them. These problem behaviours appeared to be early steps in a chain of behaviours that led to the more serious problems and offending.

Data collection in the form of self monitoring by the client herself was continued throughout the study. Recording of lying began at week one, of arguments at week three, and positive statements to staff and peers at week eleven. Data were recorded by the client on 12.5 x 7.5 cm cards in the form of a tick for every occurrence of each target behaviour.

Lying was defined as any verbal utterance made by the subject which was known to her to be discrepant from the truth or a gross exaggeration of a real situation. An argument was defined as

any verbal exchange in which the subject raised her voice substantially above normal and in which critical or negative statements were expressed. A positive statement was one which followed what the subject considered to be a desired staff or peer behaviour and in which thanks or appreciation were expressed in a positive way, e.g., "I really like the way you find time to coach the team, Ms Jones".

Treatment

Self monitoring was initially used as an assessment device but, as in other studies, it was also found to be a useful treatment technique that could be used in conjunction with social skills training (Hay, Hay & Angle, 1977). During session one the experimenter initiated a discussion on the recording of lying as an important step in its modification. The subject was given a data card and instructed to record the frequency of her lies during the next week.

During session four a discussion was held in which the experimenter explained that if the subject could engage in appropriate social interaction then she would feel less desire to become involved in trying to gain attention by inappropriate means, e.g., by telling lies. The subject agreed and over the next four weeks the conversational skills of free information and self-disclosure (Smith, 1975) were taught. These sessions involved discussion and instruction on the nature and advantage of using the skills, behaviour rehearsal in the form of a series of role plays in which the subject practised the skills, and positive feedback for perceived improvements. The subject was instructed to practise these skills with other inmates between sessions and to record the frequency of her practice.

During session eight a discussion took place with the experimenter emphasising that reciprocal negative interactions were essential to continue an argument. Fogging (Smith, 1975) was then explained as a means by which the subject could calmly acknowledge to her critic the probability that there may be some truth in what the other said, but not become involved in an argument. Training in the use of this technique continued over the next six weeks. During these sessions the skill was discussed and practised, and the subject was praised for perceived increases in competence. At the end of each session the subject was instructed to record the frequency of her practice of the skill.

During session 14 the experimenter pointed out that when the staff or her peers did things the subject liked or were kind or fair, then it was important that she praise or show appreciation to them if she wanted these behaviours to occur again. A wide variety of role plays were practised in which the experimenter praised the subject's improvements in the use of this skill. The subject recorded the frequency of use of this skill between sessions.

While formal reliability checks are highly desirable in the evaluation of the accuracy of data collected by clients especially when lying is

one of their problems, no such checks were made in the present study. The rotation of staff in industrial and residential sections of the institution meant that a prohibitively large amount of organisation would have been involved in such checks. Many target responses involving peer interactions were unobserved by staff so such reliability observations might not have been accurate. No suitably motivated peers were available for such observations at the time of the study. Despite these problems the subject was informed that the experimenter would check periodically on an informal basis with staff on the frequency of reported responses, and the subject would be confronted with any discrepancy between the two reports.

Results

Figure 1 (Panel 1) indicates that there was a dramatic decrease in the frequency of lying over the first seven weeks due to the reactivity of self-monitoring, and as a result no baseline data are available. Self-reported lying remained at a low level throughout the study and at the nine month follow-up.

Baseline data on the frequency of arguments between weeks 3 and 7 averaged 3.6 per week

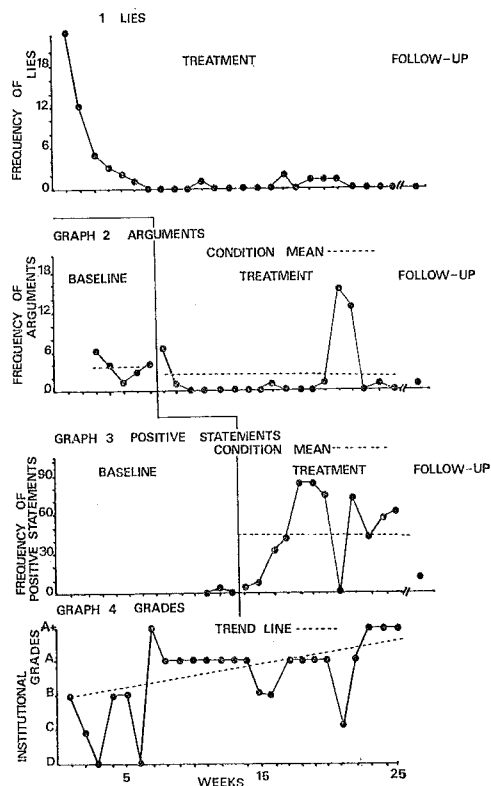


Figure 1. Frequency of lies (Panel 1), arguments (Panel 2), positive statements (Panel 3), and institutional grades for behaviour (Panel 4), for weeks 1 to 25, and follow-up.

(range 1-6) (Figure 1, Panel 2). Over the first three weeks of training in the use of "fogging" there was a steady drop in the frequency of arguments, and for the next ten weeks a very low rate was maintained. The data in the treatment phase showed large variability (range 0-15) but the mean rate or arguments (1.8) was half that of baseline (3.6). The nine month follow-up indicated that a very low frequency of argument was maintained.

The baseline data on the frequency of positive statements (Figure 1, Panel 3) collected between weeks 11 and 13 averaged 0.3 statements per week (range 0-1). The mean rate during the treatment phase was 44 per week, substantially higher than baseline. The nine month follow-up rate of 10 per week was also substantially higher than baseline.

The subject also made recordings of the practise of conversational skills (mean 42 per week, range 35-59) and "fogging" (mean 2.2 per week, range 0-11). These data were not graphed as they were not part of the multiple baseline design.

An ongoing quasi-behavioural points system operating in the institution was used as a concurrent data source throughout the programme. While most staff knew the subject was receiving treatment, few knew the nature of the therapy, so the institutional grades are presented as independent outcome data. Figure 1 (Panel 4) indicates that an increase in grades took place throughout the study. This is illustrated by the trend line constructed by the semi-average method (Parsonson, Note 1).

Discussion

For this subject social skills training proved to be useful. All three target behaviours changed rapidly after interventions were made. Despite a reversal in the data on weeks 21 and 22 the changes were maintained during the study and at the nine month follow-up. However results must be interpreted with caution as no reliability checks were made. Independent institutional grades data do add some support to the existence of behaviour change: however, the reliability of this data source is unknown. Figure 1 (Panel 1) indicates that the rate of lying decreased under baseline conditions: this reactivity did not however apply to the other two target behaviours. Kanfer (1971) has suggested that reactivity is more likely in behaviours where the direction of change is socially desirable and one possible explanation for these current data is that a reduction in lying was more socially desirable than other changes in target

behaviours.

The present study aimed not only to change the behaviour of the client but to give the client methods that were capable of changing the behaviour of others. This is most clearly illustrated in the subject praising both staff and peers for appropriate behaviour (Figure 1, Panel 3). This method is similar to that of Fedoravicus (1973) who taught a delinquent boy to reinforce his parent's attention to positive behaviours and to extinguish their attention to his inappropriate behaviour. Stokes, Fowler and Baer (1978) have also used a similar approach which they term entering natural communities of reinforcement. The present study can also be interpreted as representing what Emery and Marholin (1977) call the ecological approach. Rather than directly changing the behaviour of the perceived "deviant youth" this latter approach involves teaching the delinquent skills to modify others' behaviour and often to change the environment to accept negotiated levels of deviance. This view, according to Emery and Marholin (1977), is consistent with a large body of sociological literature indicating that delinquency is more a function of the environment than of the individual (e.g., Gibbons, 1976).

Reference Note

1. Parsonson, B. S. The analysis and presentation of graphic data in applied behaviour analysis. University of Waikato, Hamilton, N.Z., 1978.

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