

Dealing with the Problematic Inmate: Applying Effective Strategies in a Correctional Setting

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Running Head: Dealing with the Problematic Inmate
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Setting

Correctional professionals face daily challenges in changing offender behavior, a difficult undertaking at best. In Oregon, as in many states, the correctional professional organizes the operation of the facility in such a way that mental and physical health needs, educational opportunities, work skill development programs, job opportunities, and recreation occur in a safe and secure environment. Yet, within this context, not all offenders engage in such productive activities.

Some are placed in segregated or special housing units for violent behaviors. These problematic behaviors vary from harassing and provocative to damaging and dangerous. Staff may be physically assaulted or assaulted with a mixture of bodily fluids thrown in their face. While in these segregated housing environments, some offenders continue to engage in these problematic behaviors. Staff are subjected to hours of seemingly incessant yelling and screaming. A single offender has, with his bare hands, effectively destroyed a super secure cell. Some offenders choose to break sprinkler heads off of the fire-suppression system installed in their cells. These tirades may incite other offenders into similar behaviors, thus producing a harsh environment at times. But are the managers of the special housing units making use of every tool he or she has available when it comes to dealing with these behaviors?

The Technology of Behavior

I have observed both staff and offender engaging in the modification of the other's behaviors. When a human interacts with their environment, his or her behavior is modified. For example, you walk past a cohort in the hall and they say, "Hello," and you respond by saying, "Hi." Their verbal behavior is said to have elicited your response. Your response will be the basis for future interactions. Behavior analysis is the empirical study of these interactions. Applied behavior analysis is the application of the experimentally derived principles of behavior-analysis to effect observable and measurable changes in this interaction process.

Throughout the late 60's and 70's, there were many articles written regarding the success, but relative difficulty of applying the principles of behavior analysis in correctional settings (Repucci and Saunders, 1974). It seemed that while the approaches were found useful and effective, the persons applying the scientific approaches offered through behavior analysis, discontinued the approaches after they encountered operational or systemic problems. The purpose of this current article is to provide rudimentary overview of one of these approaches, contingency management, and present, in part, the findings of the application of the principles of behavior analysis in a state correctional facility in Salem, Oregon.

When you alter the consequences for a specific behavior, you are engaging in

contingency management. The two contingencies most applied in correctional settings are those that reinforce behavior and those that punish behavior.

Positive reinforcement is the application of stimuli as a consequence for a targeted behavior that results in increasing or maintaining the rate, magnitude, or duration of that targeted behavior. Social interactions (as in our exchange of salutations above), access to institution commissaries and visits, may be considered positive reinforcing stimuli, but only if they increase or maintain the rate of the behavior that was consequated by the application. The maintenance of a behavior is also the product of reinforcing stimuli. That is to say if a behavior is occurring, it is being reinforced. Most often misunderstood, negative reinforcement is the removal of stimuli to increase the rate, magnitude or duration of a targeted behavior. Allowing a well behaved offender to be discharged early from his stay in the disciplinary segregation unit which results in further appropriate behavior may be considered a negatively reinforcing stimuli. Most of our lives are controlled by negative reinforcement. If you think about it when was the last time you got twenty-dollars for washing the dishes? You washed the dishes to avoid the consequences of having dirty dishes (see fig. 1).

Punishment is a term that makes most spokespersons queasy but it has a technical definition and is used and applied daily in society.

Positive punishment is the application of stimuli that reduce the rate of a targeted behavior. If one were to be sprayed in the face with pepper spray after assaulting an officer and never again engaged in assaultive behavior, the application of pepper spray would be defined scientifically as a positive punishment. Punishment, as an applied technique, is viewed as having more side-

effects (e.g. counter-aggression, avoiding the condition or person that provides the punishment) than anticipated effects and is not commonly used in corrections today.

Negative punishment is removal of stimuli to reduce the rate of a targeted behavior.

Placing an offender in segregation as a consequence for a rule violation, and the rate of the rule violations decrease subsequently, describes an application of a negatively punitive stimuli. When previously earned privileges or property are removed, technically, it is an example of negative punishment.

	Positive	Negative
Reinforcing	Increases the rate of a specific behavior by adding a stimuli	Increases the rate of a specific behavior by removing a stimuli
Punishing	Decreases the rate of a specific behavior by adding a stimuli	Decreases the rate of a specific behavior by removing a stimuli

Fig 1

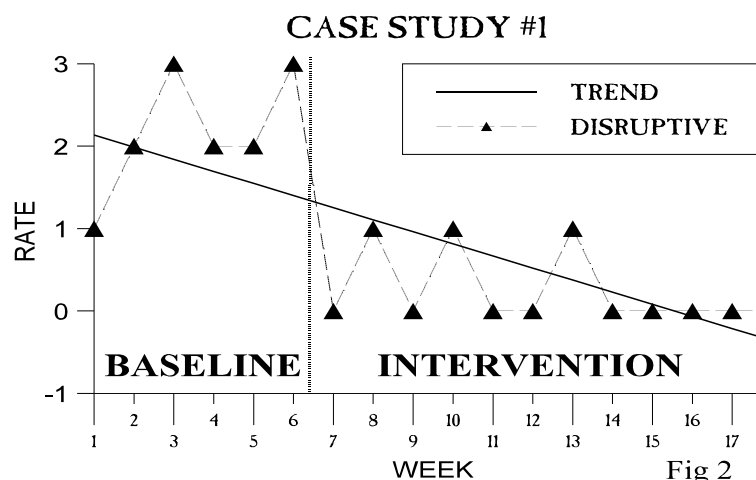
So, what does all this mean to the correctional professional? It means that many of our current offender management techniques have been studied empirically by behavior analysts. It means that the systematic application of these principles can produce very effective results, mutually beneficial to both offender and professional. It is also the basis of a system used at the Oregon State Penitentiary.

Individualized Behavior Programs

As mentioned before, some offenders continue to engage in problematic behavior after being segregated from the general population. When the consequences for these behaviors are changed, so does the rate of the behavior. Within the Intensive Management Unit, a maximum security housing unit at the Oregon State Penitentiary, individualized behavior programs are written to reduce the rate of severely dangerous behaviors.

In one case, a particular offender had been engaging in several different problematic behaviors. By staff report the offender had engaged in incessant yelling and screaming at night. He had also assaulted an officer by throwing a mixture of feces and urine. By the offender's report, these behaviors were in response to younger inmates who had kept him awake during the night.

When the escalating rate (see "baseline" of fig 2) of these behaviors began to impact the safe and secure operation of the institution, we started a structured analysis. A review of the pertinent records and interactions which revealed that staff on a particular shift had repeatedly spoke to the offender about these behaviors and were assured by the offender that these behaviors would cease. A different shift would remove the offender from his housing unit and place him in a holding cell outside of the housing unit after the offender had been yelling and screaming threatening or hostile language for hours. However, the behaviors did not cease, in fact they increased in rate and duration. An environmental analysis described a situation where the offender was engaging in problematic behaviors that would result in the application of stimuli that maintained the same problematic behavior. Specifically, a functional analysis described the behaviors of assault and the hostile yelling and screaming to be positively reinforced by social attention from correctional staff, not from other offenders as previously assumed in one condition and in another condition, negatively reinforced by removing the offender to a quiet holding cell, both of which followed episodes of



problematic behavior. Written instructions were written and correctional staff were trained what to do in the event of the problematic behavior. The intervention was simple; Staff were trained to disregard the aberrant behavior while continuing their duties with those offenders not involved in the misconduct. At the same time, the offender was not allowed to moved from his cell for programmatic purposes.

Results

Figure 2, graphically describes the results of this systematic intervention. The baseline was the period of time before the intervention, when the offender's behavior was being observed systematically via a structured data collection system. When the intervention was applied, the same data collection system measured any appreciable changes in the rate of the behavior. The objectives of the program were met when the rate of the problematic behavior reached a rate of zero for five consecutive weeks. The intervention involved the careful non-reinforcement (e.g., disregarding yelling and screaming, not allowing his maladaptive or aberrant behaviors to be the basis of a cell move) of problem behaviors along with careful and clear reinforcement of target behaviors whenever they occur. This specific schedule of reinforcement is known to behavior analysts as DRO or *differential reinforcement of other behavior* (Masters, Burish, et al., 1987).

Through this process we were able to simultaneously address both offender and staff needs. The offender had reported not being able to control his behavior. He was in the most secure setting in the department, transferring to another facility was not an option. He was deemed not appropriate for the inpatient mental health unit. Unit correctional staff reported feeling "strapped" with a behavior problem with which they had few effective tools. A dilemma with which most managers who have worked their way up the chain of command to their current position may empathize. The primary issues of better understanding the behavior of the offenders in our charge and training our officers how to deal with such challenges were addressed systematically and effectively by applying the principles of behavior analysis.

References

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