

LIFE IS COMPLICATED; ANALYSIS SHOULD BE SIMPLE

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It is probably a tribute to the progress of behavior analysis that some of our best researchers are turning their attention to analyzing ever more complex phenomena. We should all be grateful to Glenn and Malott (2004) for putting us on the road to learning about life's complexities. Behavior analysis began with the study of single organisms in a circumscribed environment. Glenn and Malott want to deal with life, and as I've already said in the title, life is complicated. Human single organisms work within a complex environment that is, at first blush, unlike the rat's or pigeon's (but that is true only because of the way we usually study the animals). The human organism's environment clearly includes other human organisms working individually and in concert with one another. And that environment is very complicated. Those other human organisms bear special relationships to one another, which we can specify in terms of reinforcement contingencies that the authors describe to be interlocking. There is also the weather, inflation, war, and for people working in a business, there are competitors, government regulations, and so on.

Once you try to specify all those complexities for human organisms, however, it becomes clear that the same order of complexities also work for the analysis of the environment of the pigeon or rat. After all, the experimenter, or more likely his or her research assistant, specifies the reinforcement contingency for the animal. Those specifications depend on a series of interlocking reinforcement contingencies, all related to what the experimenter sets out to investigate, what the previous results were, how close the chief investigator is to having to write or present a paper on the laboratory's results, the abundance of research funds available, the degree to which the laboratory is currently supported, the number of courses the investigator needs to teach, the demands of the university culture on the investigator having to get grants, and so on, and so forth. In other words, the environment of the pigeon and the rat that we work with, or in many cases had worked with, in a laboratory is equally complicated since it also is dependent on the interlocking reinforcement contingencies of human beings, never mind the cultural selection mechanism that Glenn and Malott discuss. Of course, the hallmark of behavior analysis is experimentation to discover exactly what the variables are that influence operant behavior. This situation with animal behavior as the major dependent variable might well be an effective way of discovering what aspects of the organization—in this case the laboratory, the department, the university, its teaching assignments, or the funding environment—would allow us to determine the most efficient way of analyzing the organization.

Glenn and Malott (2004) are interested in analyzing the complexities of the organization in which the interlocking reinforcement contingencies occur. My first, no doubt very naïve reaction, to the paper is to question whether we are ready to undertake

the analysis of this complexity. Given the complexity of the analysis, maybe not. What if we stay with the reinforcement contingency of the individual person, and ask only how the various environmental changes affect the reinforcement contingency acting on a single human organism? In the case of the faculty member doing research with the rat or pigeon, presumably we can reduce the teaching load, provide a teaching assistant or a research assistant, or award a local research grant. Production of these kinds of changes in the environment of the organization, through a particular faculty member's reinforcement contingency environment, would allow us to gauge the "product." In this case, that product could be simply the number of animals run, the number of experiments completed, or the creativity of the experiments performed as a result of manipulations of the organizational rules or other aspects of the environment.

But let us return to the example of the organization that the authors use. Their organization makes money to the degree that the product it sells is found to be reinforcing by enough customers so that they go on to buy that product. The workers labor sufficiently so that the money that they earn and the other aspects of the job are sufficiently pleasant (reinforcing) that they continue to work. Some of these reinforcers are changed due to inflation; others are modified when the working conditions (music, air flow, temperature, noise, etc.) affect the reinforcing conditions of the job. Both efficient and inefficient behaviors continue because of the reinforcer that is contingent on them. Sometimes, of course, the contingencies between the organization's success and the worker's behavior are antagonistic to one another. Thus, the authors' example of adding water to milk make the reinforcer for the worker bigger and easier to attain, but in the long run make the product less reinforcing to the customer and thus less reinforcing to the organization (which might not survive selling watered-down milk).

In sum, it seems to me that an organization is not like an organism. It consists of too many separate and independent parts—organisms that work under various, often-contradictory reinforcement contingencies. The good or effective manager is one who is able to take advantage of all the varying reinforcers (different for different people in different stages and positions) to make them contingent, and therefore equally effective, for all the people who work in the organization. The key, it seems to me, to gaining an understanding of an organization is to understand the components. Those components are different people working under various reinforcement contingencies. In the end, the components do add up to provide success for an organization, but it does not pay to call it a reinforcer since organizations are not organisms. It is probably best to learn to understand organizations by surveying the various interlocking reinforcement contingencies and determining which ones are critical, one at a time. This can be done best by modifying the variables, one at a time. As they increase or reduce the profit of the company, or the creativity of the university research, we can then turn our attention to additional reinforcement contingencies which seem not to be critical at first look. To the extent that some reinforcement contingencies turn out not to be interlocked with other reinforcement contingencies, to that extent we will probably find them to be rule-governed consequences. Workers often behave in accordance with local reinforcement contingencies that are largely a function of reinforcers occurring from rule following and

nothing else. These are likely to be the inefficient behaviors that can be curtailed if not totally eliminated in an organization.

REFERENCE

Glenn, S. S., & Malott, M. E. (2004). Complexity and selection: Implications for organizational change. *Behavior and Social Issues, 13*, 89-106.