

## A REPLY TO REFORMING WELFARE REFORM

Richard W. Malott  
*Western Michigan University*

**ABSTRACT:** These comments on Mark Mattaini's article in this issue are from the perspective of the three-contingency model of performance management.

**Key words:** welfare reform, performance management, avoidance contingencies

### Cultural Analysis: An Alternative Vision

In general, I agree with Mark Mattaini's excellent analysis and proposal for reforming welfare reform (1998). However, I have a few comments.

I doubt if "risk of losing the opportunities" to do better is less aversive than any other avoidance contingency. Avoidance contingencies, per se, can be very aversive; and when you fail to avoid, it will produce anger and depression; and when it is too hard and the potential loss is too great, you are going to get much countercontrol-resistance. I think the trick to nonaversive aversive control is small, relatively easy response requirements, with aversive outcomes that are very small, for those occasions when the person does fail to make the avoidance response before the deadline. For example, walking across a tranquil street in Morningside Heights involves structurally similar avoidance contingencies as walking across a midtown Manhattan street, midblock, mid rush hours; but the former is much less aversive than the latter.

I also doubt if the education of Dora is the optimal strategy. It may help, and it may even be necessary in terms of job skills; but I fear it will be far from sufficient, even if she is young. I am afraid that, if she is old enough to have a baby, she is beyond the reach of our behavioral technology or anyone else's in terms of changing values, work habits, self-management skills, etc. We are rarely able to make changes of that significance in adults or even teenagers. What we can do, and very well, is manage the performance of adults and even teenagers; performance management is the technology we have to offer the public at this time and, I suspect, for a long time in the future.

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Please address all correspondence to Richard Malott, Department of Psychology, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5052. Email: [Richard\\_Malott@compuserve.com](mailto:Richard_Malott@compuserve.com).

#### MALOTT

Yes, I agree that it is better to start the intervention with added incentives on day one, as Mark suggests; but if you do not have those added incentives, you may have to wait until your client hears the flap of the angel's wings (e.g., the loss of welfare support) before you can get commitment and especially before you can get adherence. However, for me to have addressed that issue in my article (1998) would have made an excessively long article even longer. The crucial point is that, in any case, the contingency needs deadlines; and when the contingency has deadlines, it is an avoidance contingency (e.g., Dora must have completed her week's tasks by her weekly meeting, or she would lose the opportunity to get the extra 10%). And beware the well-meaning case worker who says, "Don't worry about missing the deadline, Dora; just come in whenever you do manage to get the tasks done, and you'll get your 10%." That case worker will cause Dora to trod down that well-traveled primrose path to infinite procrastination, as would so trod Debby, Dirk, and Mark and I, if we had no deadlines.

Concerning Dora's willingness to participate in Debby's performance management plan, first, Dora had already lost her welfare support. Debby's new plan was her only way of getting back on welfare. So, five will get you ten Dora would grab it and appreciate Debby's efforts on her behalf. However, suppose Dora were still on welfare and not making any job-finding progress. Then Debby's new plan would have to involve the same contingencies, but for extra money, with her current welfare level remaining intact. Of course, if Debby's new plan were to make current noncontingent money contingent, forget it. Second, five will get you another ten that Dora will go for Debby's original new plan, regardless of Debby's color, given that it is Debby's plan or no support; and five will get you 20 she would go for it if her friends assured her that Debby was one whitey she could trust. On the other hand, Dora would reject the plan that made her current welfare check response contingent, even if it were proposed by her black Baptist minister. In other words, yes, I agree that race prejudice runs deep, but not as deep as the color green.

Concerning Mark's performance management contingency based on avoidance of the loss of a 10% bonus vs. Debby's performance management contingency based on avoidance of the loss of a week's welfare support, I am not convinced that either strategy would produce independence more quickly than the other; I think Mattaini and Magnabosco (1997) do not really address the contingencies Debby had proposed (and proposed only for illustrative purposes). However, I think both strategies would have a fighting chance, if by *independence* we mean approaching something like financial *independence*. However, if by *independence* we mean no longer needing a performance manager, I am much less

## A REPLY TO REFORMING WELFARE REFORM

optimistic. It depends on many factors, but I think, in general, behavior analysts are naive about their ability to change values and self-management repertoires of adults, naive about the ability of the natural contingencies to maintain behavior once the person has "come in contact" with them or understands them (usually those natural contingencies are still ineffective in governing behavior properly), too quick in passing their performance-management responsibilities back to the client, and too unwilling to face the possibility that most of us need life-long, external performance management in many areas (especially people who start out in serious trouble, as Dora has, but also the rest of us sitting on the sidelines).

### **Taking Action**

I think it may be most effective to offer assistance to those who will directly benefit from welfare reform. They are the stake holders. It may be most effective to show them a successful behavior-analytic model, in an inspirational mode, and to help them effectively lobby the legislators, who in turn will go where the money/votes go. I think the legislators will not legislate if they do not benefit in terms of money or votes, regardless of effectiveness data. In other words, I think we will have more success if we can show legislators how successful welfare reform will keep them in office than if we show them how horrible child poverty is. And, in addition to working with welfare recipients, it might be even more helpful if we could convincingly show some specific big business interests how they would directly benefit from effective welfare reform, as was done with the insurance industry concerning cigarettes, highway safety, and global warming. Big business has more expertise and clout than we will ever have in influencing legislation. But to begin to have an impact, we need at least a few people who dedicate their lives 24/7 to working on the legislation problem.

### **Conclusions**

In summary:

- Effective performance management contingencies will always be based on aversive control; however the perceived aversiveness can be greatly reduced by making those contingencies easy to meet and basing them on minimally aversive outcomes.
- Education may, sometimes, be a necessary component of welfare reform; but it will rarely be a sufficient one.
- We can most readily get commitment to the use of performance management contingencies if they involve the possibility of getting

## MALOTT

reinforcers not previously available; and this is more important than the racial and class distrust of the client.

- We may never be able to help the adult client become completely independent of a performance manager, but we can do an outstanding job of performance management.
- Effective action might be contingent on demonstrating to big business its financial benefits from behavior-analytic welfare reform so it will lobby Congress.

## REFERENCES

- Malott, R. W. (1998). Performance management and welfare reform: The three-contingency model of performance management applied to welfare reform. *Behavior and Social Issues*, 8, 109-139. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/bsi.v8i2.324>
- Mattaini, M. A. (1998). Reforming welfare reform. *Behavior and Social Issues*, 8, 141-148. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/bsi.v8i2.325>
- Mattaini, M. A., & Magnabosco, J. L. (1997). Reworking welfare: Untangling the web. In P. A. Lamal (Ed.), *Cultural contingencies: Behavior analytic perspectives on cultural practices* (pp. 151-167). Westport, CT: Praeger.