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## We're Using Positive Reinforcement, so it's all Good – Right?

**By Lesley Barreira**

**Editors: Angie Nethercott, M.A., RP**
**Chanelle Salonia, M.A., BCBA**

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Imagine that you are supporting a person with an intellectual or developmental disability who is about to engage in an activity of their choosing, and they are highly motivated to do it. Maybe it's singing at a karaoke night, attending a group, going fishing, or even something that feels like hard work such as household chores, studying for a test, or working out. Perhaps in this circumstance, your role is just about helping them access opportunities to engage in the activity, or perhaps you're there to support them in building skills to achieve mastery, or maybe you're there to provide a little encouragement and share in the joy of someone doing something that is meaningful to them. This definitely sounds like an all-round good news story, but what if the situation isn't so ideal? Just upend one or a few of the features:

- The activity *isn't* truly something that the person would choose to do.
- They are not motivated.
- The opportunities are less than optimal.
- Skills are lagging, and
- Engaging in the activity doesn't seem to inspire feelings of joy and accomplishment.

Suddenly, the good news story has turned into a really long day for everyone. So, you try your best to encourage and cajole, but what if even your excellent ability to build rapport and your words of support aren't enough to nudge the person you support to partake in the activity? If this impasse persists, then this is usually when teams bring in programming to create positive behavioural change – with good intentions – especially if participating in this activity is truly in the best interest of the person. So, as long as you and your team aren't forcing them to do something, and your strategies rely on praise, encouragement, and reward, it's all good, right? Well, maybe…or maybe not. Unfortunately, even so-called positive reinforcement strategies with the best of intentions can have a dark side. In this article, we will explore a few ideas from nonlinear analysis, and the constructional approach to help safeguard against this dark side.

**The Usual Suspects**

Think about some of the typical strategies that are enlisted to motivate people to do something, like token systems, incentives, "first-then" statements (e.g., "*First* put your dinner plate in the dishwasher, *then* you can have dessert."), and really any kind of contingency that involves controlling the access to some preferred item or activity (you could actually include working for a pay cheque in this category). Even when the intention of the direct support professional (DSP) is noble, and the action is directly beneficial to the person supported, coercion could be at play.

Wait. W*hat?*

But isn't this positive reinforcement?  How can coercion and positive reinforcement co-occur when positive reinforcement is supposed to be "good" and the opposite of coercion? Well, let's take a closer look. According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 'coercion' is defined as "the action of making somebody do something that they do not want to do, using force or threatening to use force." We can probably agree that this is absolutely not how we want to engage the people around us, including the people whom we support. When we set up programs or contingencies to motivate the individuals we support to engage in certain actions (e.g., brushing their teeth, asking nicely instead of yelling, smoking fewer cigarettes), we usually select some highly preferred and desirable item or activity that they can gain access to upon completing the toothbrushing or whatever the action is that we're trying to increase. And it's true, this does make the contingency more potent, and the individual might even be super jazzed about the prospect of 'earning' the thing they want. But if this is the *only* way they can access this item or activity, coercion is probably in the room. The concern is that, by design, we've created a situation in which the person we support has no alternatives (Goldiamond, 1976). Presumably, the item or activity that is being used as the incentive is desirable so, by extension, does that not mean that the state of being denied that same item or activity is undesirable? Even though overt force or the threat of the use of force is absent, there isn't really a choice here. The individual is being compelled into the action – either the person does it and gains access, or they don't do it, and they're out of luck, access denied (Sidman, 1999). Does that feel weird to you too? If it does, it's probably because you're reacting to the fact that there are two courses of action here, and only one will grant the person what they want, which feels like "using force" in a way, doesn't it? This isn't categorically bad in all situations, everywhere, all the time, but it deserves our attention to really think about our programming.

Does this mean that all token programs, incentives, and 'first-then' statements are inherently evil? No, of course not. When implemented responsibly and with care, these strategies can expand people's repertoires, thereby reducing the occurrence of harmful behaviours, and opening more opportunities for choice and meaningful engagement. The point is that exercising a little caution and reflection here is a good thing. It's actually less about whether or not something is technically 'positive reinforcement;' it's more about whether we are intentionally creating conditions that promote behaviours that are in the interest of the person we support

**Glossary**

**Nonlinear analysis:** a framework for understanding behaviour that looks beyond the 'antecedent-behaviour-consequence' linear sequence. A behaviour of interest is best understood as a function of its relationship to multiple intersecting contingencies and alternative behaviours.

**Constructional approach:** an orientation based on a nonlinear analysis in which the solution to behaviours that challenge involves expanding skills and building new and alternative repertoires instead of solutions driven by eliminating or reducing the behaviours that challenge.

**Positive reinforcement:** a stimulus that follows (is added; hence 'positive' or '+') a behaviour of interest, and its effect is that the behaviour of interest will occur at the same or higher rate in the future.

(Perone, 2003). Knowing that coercion is the ride-along of limited choice, this brings us to the next idea: degrees of freedom.

**Degrees of Freedom**

'Freedom' can be defined in many ways; from a nonlinear analysis perspective, 'freedom' is about the availability of genuine choices (de Fernandes & Dittrich, 2018; Goldiamond, 1976). 'Genuine' refers to whether the choice is actually available based on opportunities and repertoires, and 'choice' is basically how many alternatives a person has available to them to achieve some consequence or outcome (Goldiamond, 1976). For example, as a 5'3" woman who can't dribble a basketball, a career as a professional basketball player in the NBA is unsurprisingly not a genuine choice for me. Let's look at a hypothetical scenario. Think of a person you are working with who is on a fixed income, and let's say they came to you and said that they'd love to make a little extra money. Given their opportunities and relevant repertoires, how many different ways can they actually make extra income? This brings us to the idea of degrees of freedom. If someone only has one response (one choice) available, then we'd say that this person has zero degrees of freedom (think of zero as referring to no other choices, they just have the one option and that's it). If someone has two responses available, then we'd say this person has one degree of freedom. If there are three responses available, then it's two degrees of freedom, and so on (Goldiamond, 1976). Let's return to the person who is looking for more income, how many degrees of freedom do they have?

Generally speaking, the more degrees of freedom, the freer one is, which is a good thing (to a point – you've probably been in a situation where having too many alternatives creates its own problems). How do degrees of freedom relate to coercion? Well, there's an inverse relationship with degrees of freedom and degrees of coercion; as degrees of freedom go up, the degrees of coercion go down and vice versa (de Fernandes & Dittrich, 2018; Goldiamond, 1976). What does this mean for the person you support who's looking to make a little extra money? Let's say their only viable option to make some cash is to wash dishes on an evening shift at a restaurant, so that's zero degrees of freedom. Now, let's say that they were lucky enough to land an interview and get the job. Great! However, after working a few shifts, they feel like their boss and working conditions are shady, and they aren't being treated well. Without other job prospects at hand (alternatives), the individual may feel like they have to stay on at this job because they need the money. Can you see how coercion is likely to slip into this situation?

As mentioned, degrees of freedom are influenced by opportunities and relevant repertoires (Goldiamond, 1976). As an example, think of someone you are supporting who is interested in dating for the purpose of finding a romantic partner. What are their current opportunities to meet someone? What are all the prerequisite and requisite skills needed to enter and successfully navigate the dating world, and which of these skills do they possess? In addition to opportunities and repertoires, what kinds of supports and barriers exist in their physical and social worlds? To what extent are the actions, exclusions, and choices of others creating limitations? For example, imagine that this person has signed up for a singles event, but no support staff are available to give them a ride, or maybe they've been savvy enough to create a profile on an online dating site, but potential matches keep "swiping left" on them, or what if their enthusiasm to start dating is not shared by their friends or family members? Any attempts to date may be disapproved of – or worse – punished. So, in some ways, some choices aren't really choices at all because they are constrained by other factors (de Fernandes & Dittrich, 2018; Goldiamond, 1976). If this individual ended up resorting to a secret online relationship, or if they find themselves in situations where they feel compelled to send money or provocative photos to love interests to keep them from breaking off contact, given the limited opportunities and repertoires, it totally makes sense how they ended up there.

So, what can we do about this? It's helpful to remind ourselves that the actions that we see the people we support engage in have been selected into their repertoire given their unique histories and circumstances. Although less harmful and less costly alternative actions may

*seem* to be available, history and circumstance dictated why those alternatives weren't selected. Those alternatives may not have been genuine choices due to limited opportunities and repertoires. There will always be some situations in which there may be zero degrees of freedom (like me wanting to play in the NBA) but, whenever possible, when degrees of freedom are limited for the people we serve, we should be actively looking for ways in which our programming can increase degrees of freedom, so that they can have more choices available to them to build a life that is guided by their own personal goals and values.

**Can I Really Be on the Lookout for This Stuff?**

Yes, you can...and you must or else! Just kidding of course. But seriously, it's difficult to safeguard against things you don't see because they're not on your radar. Some signals from Goldiamond (1976), Layng (2009), and Sidman, (2001) that may suggest that degrees of freedom are limited are:

- Persons supported or staff seem to "work" to escape from or avoid certain people or situations, or they seem to "buck the system."
- DSPs feel like "gatekeepers" when implementing programming, and the person they support gets mad at staff for following the program, especially if it involves denying or taking something away from them.
- Individuals engage in costly or harmful behaviours that challenge.

So, knowing that coercion can creep into the strategies that we put in place (even if they're based on positive reinforcement), and that coercion grows as choices shrink, let's look at one scenario to begin thinking about what you'd do to increase degrees of freedom and reduce coercive practices.

Scenario: The dish would like to run away with the spoon

Kai lives alone in a supported independent living apartment. There is a long history of Kai not washing their dishes for days on end. Often, there isn't a single clean dish or utensil, and the dirty dishes are stacked up in the sink and on the counter. The supporting staff have posted visual reminders, offered reminder phone calls after meals, and they usually make comments about the smell of the food stuck on the dishes, or warn Kai that they are going to end up with mice or roaches. These strategies haven't helped. When asked why they don't do the dishes, Kai usually says that the pots need to soak, so that's what they're doing. Kai also says that they hate washing dishes, and it's overwhelming when the pile is too big. Kai states that they really just want a dishwasher like the group living apartment down the hall, but can't afford one, and since Kai lives alone, no one supports the idea. If a staff member or a family member really gets on their case and lectures them about it, Kai typically hangs up on them, or goes to their room, closes the door, and waits for them to leave. The standoff usually carries on for the week and resolves when the weekend staff end up helping wash the dishes, or they make a deal with Kai that they'll do the dishes for them if Kai completes another chore in the apartment.

As of last week, there is now a sense of urgency because the mice have arrived, and Kai's received a warning notice from the property manager. As a result, the staff team had a big sit-down with Kai and their family, and together they created a program in which Kai can earn two dollars if they wash the dishes after a meal. If Kai doesn't wash the dishes for two meals in a row, they will lose a dollar. If all the dishes are done before going to bed, they get a bonus of one dollar. It was suggested that the money they earn could go toward buying a dishwasher. Kai was initially very excited at the idea of earning money and did all the dishes for three days in a row (which has never happened before, and Kai, their parents, and the whole staff team were totally stoked about it). But now Kai is refusing to participate in the program because they want to use the earned money to buy a gaming system, not a dishwasher. Since that wasn't in the original agreement, Kai was told that they can work on getting a gaming system another time. The staff have discovered that, to deal with the mice, Kai has been taking the dishes down the

hall, and asking the people in the group residence to pop them in their dishwasher. Kai isn't speaking to their primary staff who said that they're going to lose the earned money to date if they don't re-start the program.

With a constructional approach in mind (focusing on building repertoires instead of narrowly focusing on how to eliminate the "problem" behaviour), consider the following questions:

- What are the costs and benefits of the current behaviour that challenges and possible alternative behaviours?
- What would Kai say the ideal outcome would be?
- What relevant skills do they have to achieve the outcome?
- What are the current opportunities available for Kai to work toward, and to achieve the ideal outcome?
- If there is a program in place, what's the goal? Is it about building repertoires or eliminating unwanted behaviours?
- Are there any signals that coercion is at play?
- Are the degrees of freedom limited in any way? If yes, what kind of programming or strategies would help with increasing degrees of freedom?

**Redouble Efforts on Building Instead of Eliminating Repertoires**

Positive reinforcement (when used thoughtfully and compassionately) is still the most powerful resource we have at our disposal to promote skill development (Sidman, 1999), but there are instances in which well-intended programs based on strategies using positive reinforcement can unwittingly involve coercion. Due to limited opportunities and repertoire, many of the individuals we support find themselves in situations in which they have limited degrees of freedom, and there are real consequences to this, which we'll see reflected in their behaviour. A nonlinear analysis and the constructional approach remind us that the overarching objective should be about creating environments that people *want* to be in – environments rich in choice. When genuine choices are limited, our programming should work toward increasing degrees of freedom to benefit the person we support in the short and long term, and open doors to new and meaningful opportunities.

**About the Author**

Lesley is an Assistant Clinical Professor in the Psychiatry & Behavioural Neurosciences Department at McMaster University and a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) who has worked in fields of children's mental health, neonatal follow up, and intellectual and developmental disabilities across the lifespan. Lesley works at Surrey Place in Toronto and serves clients and caregivers in Northwestern Ontario. Her clinical interests include parent and teacher mediated interventions, goal setting in self-management, and infusing Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) into traditional functional behaviour assessment and intervention.

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