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Training residential staff and supervisors to conduct traditional functional analyses



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ABSTRACT

In this study we extended a training outlined by to behavioral technicians working for a residential service provider for adults with developmental disabilities. Specifically, we trained ten supervisors and four assistants to organize, conduct, collect data for, and interpret the results of traditional functional analyses (FA; Iwata et al., 1994). Performance was initially low and improved across all measures following training. Results extend previous FA training research by including a tangible condition and by demonstrating that individuals with little to no prior experience conducting FAs can be taught all of the skills required to autonomously conduct them in a relatively short period of time.

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1. Introduction

Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities served in staffed residential settings typically engage in problem behavior (Csorba, Radvanyi, Regenyi and Dinya, 2011; Holden and Gitlesen, 2006; Lowe et al., 2007). The occurrence of problem behavior in these settings can produce a precarious environment for both caretaker and client alike because it can result in property destruction and/or injury to the client, the caretaker, or others for whom the caretaker is responsible. Problem behavior may also be undesirable for clients because its occurrence can lead care providers to place clients into more restrictive environments, which may impede their access to higher preferred activities and/or settings. Because clients have a right to treatments that facilitate inclusion into less restrictive environments (Van Houten et al., 1988), it is common for care providers to attempt to eliminate problem behavior.

Typically, the first step in eliminating problem behavior is identifying its function. Although there are a variety of assessments commonly used to identify the function of problem behavior (i.e., indirect, descriptive, and experimental), not all are equally valid. The experimental functional analysis (FA; Iwata et al., 1994a/1994 is by far the most valid of the functional assessments because it identifies the antecedent events that evoke, and consequent events that maintain, problem behavior via experimental manipulation. Furthermore, FAs have been shown to identify a clear function of problem behavior in 95.6% of cases (Hanley et al., 2003). Indirect and descriptive functional assessments of problem behavior are far less accurate and frequently misidentify the true function(s) of problem behavior (c.f. Pence, Roscoe, Bourret and Ahearn,

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2009; Zarcone, Rodgers, Iwata, Rourke and Dorsey, 1991.). This misidentification can lead to the application of inappropriate interventions that can be counter-therapeutic and may actually intensify problem behavior (e.g., Iwata, Pace, Cowdery and Miltenberger, 1994). Thus, the FA has become the standard of assessment in the field of applied behavior analysis (Mace, 1994). Given their validity and accuracy, individuals charged with addressing problem behavior in group-home settings should strive to use FAs to identify the function of problem behavior.

However, in order for FAs to be regularly conducted in group home settings, a professional in the organization needs to have the skill set required to independently conduct and interpret the results of FAs. Previous research has shown that it is possible to train teachers (e.g., Moore et al., 2002; Wallace, Doney, Mintz-Resudek and Tarbox, 2004), caregivers/parents (e.g., Najdowski et al., 2008), undergraduate students (e.g., Iwata), and group home staff (Phillips and Mudford, 2008) to serve as therapists who, under the supervision of more trained personnel, can conduct the sessions of an FA with a high degree of procedural fidelity.

For example, Iwata demonstrated that in about 2 h, 11 upper-level undergraduate students could be trained to conduct FA conditions with adequate fidelity. However, in order for this training to be useful in group home settings the trainee (a behavioral supervisor) would need to have the repertoire necessary to independently conduct FA sessions, organize other aspects of FA sessions (e.g., ensure that necessary materials are present and that appropriate pre-session events occur), and collect, graph, and interpret FA data without additional support. One limitation of Iwata et al. is that their participants were only trained to conduct FA sessions. They were not trained to organize the environment in which FA sessions occurred (e.g., remove inappropriate materials from and place appropriate materials in the assessment area), engage in important pre-session behavior (e.g., provide clients with pre-session exposure to attention during attention conditions) or to collect, graph, or interpret FA data. Additionally, the training protocol was not comprehensive (i.e., it did not include ignore or tangible conditions). Thus, it is unknown whether a brief (less than 2 h) FA training, like the one outlined by Iwata et al., would be sufficient to teach someone to independently organize and conduct FAs with a high degree of procedural fidelity. It is also unclear whether participants can be taught to conduct tangible and ignore conditions with the same type of training used to teach the other conditions.

In partial response to this limitation, Phillips and Mudford, 2008 added an alone condition to a training protocol adapted from Iwata and trained four residential staff members to implement FA conditions with a high degree of procedural fidelity. Three of their participants had high school degrees and one participant had some college experience. All had little to no formal training in applied behavior analysis. As was the case for Iwata, one limitation of Phillips and Mudford was that they did not train their participants to organize each FA session (e.g., ensure that correct stimuli were present and other stimuli absent) or to collect, graph, and interpret FA data. Additionally, their training protocol did not include a tangible condition. Finally, their participant pool was limited to entry-level group home staff. This specific demographic, along with the demographic targeted by Iwata (e.g., undergraduate students not employed by a residential service provider), would not likely be asked to organize, conduct, and interpret the results of an FA without supervision. Therefore, it remains to be examined whether a single training protocol would be sufficient to train individuals who might be expected to independently organize and conduct FAs, and to collect, graph, and interpret FA data, in a group home organization.

Thus, the purpose of the current study was to replicate Iwata and to extend Iwata et al. and Phillips and Mudford, 2008 by training the behavioral supervisors and assistants of a residential service provider, whose job description could require them to independently organize, conduct, and interpret data from an FA in which tangible and ignore conditions were included.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

2.1.1. Supervisors

Ten supervisors participated in this study. Each supervisor had a Master's degree in social work or counseling. Three supervisors were board certified behavior analysts (BCBA), one had completed three on-line courses in behavior analysis, two had completed two on-line courses in behavior analysis, two completed one on-line course in behavior analysis, and two had received no academic training in behavior analysis. The professional experience that each supervisor had in designing behavior supports varied; however, none had any previous experience conducting FAs. Their time as supervisors with the agency ranged from one month to 7 years (mean = 24.5 months). In all subsequent tables and graphs the performance of board-certified supervisors is distinguished from non-board certified supervisors.

2.1.2. Assistants

Four assistants participated in this study. Assistants provided support to supervisors in whatever capacity that was required of them. Each assistant was pursuing a Bachelor's degrees in various fields (e.g., social work, theater, occupational therapy) and had no academic training in behavior analysis or any prior exposure to FA methodology.

2.2. Setting

We conducted baseline sessions in supervisors' offices in various locations across the participating organization. Offices contained a desk and at least two chairs. We conducted the FA training in a conference room at the regional headquarters of the

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