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# Stereotypy I: A review of behavioral assessment and treatment

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## Abstract

In this paper, we review definitional issues related to stereotypy, behavioral interpretations of stereotypy, procedures for determining operant function(s) of stereotypy, and behavioral interventions for stereotypy. In general, a preponderance of the assessment literature suggests that most forms of stereotypy are maintained by automatic reinforcement. Review of the treatment literature suggests that antecedent (e.g., environmental enrichment) and consequent (e.g., differential reinforcement of alternative behavior) interventions produce at least short-term reductions in stereotypy. Suggestions for further assessment and treatment of stereotypy are provided.

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Although the literature suggests that specific forms of stereotypy may be more common (e.g., body-rocking), there have been dozens if not hundreds of response forms called stereotypy. As a result, the question of what constitutes “stereotypy” has been subject to considerable debate and empirical evaluation. There is no clear answer. Based strictly on response form, Berkson (1967) identified two broad categories of stereotyped behavior; repetitive movements, such as body-rocking, and non-repetitive movements, such as limb or body posturing. Subsequent researchers have stipulated that stereotypy is non-functional and is not marked by a clear antecedent stimulus (e.g., Lewis & Baumeister, 1982).

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Berkson (1983) later proposed a categorization of stereotypy according to the following criteria: (a) the behavior is voluntary (implying that the behavior is operant as opposed to respondent and ruling-out “tics”), (b) the behavior lacks variability, (c) the behavior persists over time (e.g., for at least several months), (d) the behavior is immutable when faced with environmental changes, and (e) the behavior is out of synchrony with the individual’s expected age-related development.

Researchers have generally agreed that stereotyped behavior lacks variability; however, the results of a recent study suggests that body-rocking exhibited by individuals with DD is actually more variant on an episode-to-episode basis than is the body-rocking of matched individuals with typical development (Newel, Incedon, Bodfish, & Sprague, 1999). Thus, the degree of variability may differ across response forms. Some researchers also contend that stereotypy contains an element of rhythmicity or “periodicity” (e.g., Lewis & Baumeister, 1982; Ross, Yu, & Kropla, 1998), though this characteristic too has recently been challenged. According to Ross et al., periodicity, as opposed to rhythmicity, connotes that behavior occurs at fixed points or intervals in time and is therefore indicative of temporal regularity. Based on a refined criterion, demonstrations of periodicity appear to be limited to a single topography of stereotypy, body-rocking (Ross et al.). Still other researchers suggest that time allocation to repetitive behavior should be considered for classification (e.g., Sackett, 1978; Tierney, McGuire, & Walton, 1978). This proposal is based on the notion that stereotypy is problematic because it absorbs too much of an individual’s time.

The conflicting views and findings provide a rather equivocal picture of what constitutes “stereotypy.” Even where there is general agreement, empirical evidence is lacking. For example, researchers generally agree that stereotypy lacks a clear social function. Nevertheless, no systematic method for ruling-out social functions has been utilized in studies of prevalence. In addition, there is some consensus that repetition and invariance are necessary dimensions; however, there is some ambiguity about how many bouts of behavior, the duration of each bout (occurrence), and how similar successive responses must be to constitute “invariance.” To some extent, time allocation (on a daily basis) to repetitive behavior and immutability appear to be important dimensions, but neither has been quantified. Furthermore, some researchers have extended the use of the term “stereotypy” to behavior that appears to be invariant, but that lack dimensions of repetition (e.g., hand mouthing).

As it pertains to invariance, the context in which repetitive behavior is exhibited and the salience of the behavior are contributing factors in determining whether behavior should be deemed problematic. Researchers have noted that forms of stereotypy are displayed both by individuals with DD and individuals with typical development (e.g., Schwartz, Gallagher, & Berkson, 1986; Smith & Van Houten, 1996; Woods & Miltenberger, 1996). However, individuals with DD often display stereotypy across a variety of stimulus contexts, in conjunction with multiple repetitive response forms, and in a manner that is highly salient to others in the environment (Berkson & Andriacchi, 2000; Berkson, Rafaeli-Mor, & Tarnovsky, 1999; Smith & Van Houten, 1996). The apparent insensitivity of some behavior to potentially competing social variables seems to be an important feature for distinguishing between response forms that are merely repetitive in nature and those that are “stereotypy.”

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