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Evaluating pictorial preference assessment: The effect of differential outcomes on preference assessment results

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ABSTRACT

Three formats for assessing preferences were examined, tangible, pictorial with access, and pictorial without access. Reinforcer assessments were conducted to verify reinforcer effects. Phase 1 examined the assessment formats in alternating blocks of trials. Phase 2 examined results of the entire pictorial without access condition administered first followed by the other formats. Results of Phase 1 indicate similar preference hierarchies for 4 out of 5 participants regardless of format. Phase 2 reinforcer assessment results indicate pictorial without access assessments may be accurate for some but not all participants when assessments are completed in their entirety. Results further indicate that pictorial without access assessments take the least amount of time to administer. Extension and application of these results are discussed.

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Several preference assessment techniques have been developed to assess the potential reinforcing effects of stimuli. While several methods to assess preference have been developed (DeLeon & Iwata, 1996; Pace, Ivancic, Edwards, Iwata, & Page, 1985), the paired-stimulus preference assessment developed by Fisher et al. (1992) has some useful benefits when working with individuals with special needs. The presentation of only two stimuli at a time may be necessary for individuals with severe cognitive disabilities. The results of a paired stimulus assessment generally yield a well-distributed hierarchy of preference due to the paired presentation that forces the individual to choose one item, even when both items may be less preferred. A well-distributed hierarchy can be especially useful when attempting to compare results of different assessment techniques.

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Preference assessment procedures effectively identify stimuli that function as reinforcers (DeLeon & Iwata, 1996; Fisher et al., 1992). These assessments have typically been used with edible items or leisure activities that could be placed in front of the participant. Several studies have examined alternative presentation formats to assess preferences, including the use of pictures (Higbee, Carr, & Harrison, 1999; Northup, George, Jones, Broussard, & Vollmer, 1996) or verbal assessments (Cohen-Almeida, Graff, & Ahearn, 2000; Northup, Jones, Broussard, & George, 1996). These alternative formats are important extensions of the current tangible preference assessment techniques for several reasons. First, they allow assessment of items that may not be presented directly to a participant, such as trips to the store or going to the park. Second, they may save time or money.

The use of pictorial or verbal formats however, has not consistently demonstrated the ability to identify reinforcers. Higbee et al. (1999) found that tangible assessments more accurately identified reinforcers than a pictorial assessment, yet in their study selecting a picture did not result in access to the item. Different results were reported when approach responses resulted in the participant accessing the selected items (Cohen-Almeida et al., 2000; Graff & Gibson, 2003). It is unclear if different results reported in the literature could be attributed to the availability or unavailability of approached stimuli instead of the pictorial or verbal format. To better understand the role of pictures or verbal responses during preference assessments, it would be necessary to examine results of three assessment formats, including assessment formats with access to approached items and without access to approached items within the same study.

The current study examined the use of pictures to assess preferences of consumable stimuli with participants with developmental disabilities. Three preference assessment formats were conducted to determine whether or not pictures could be used to generate similar preference hierarchies when compared to a tangible format. These formats included presenting pictures of items then granting access to approached pictures and not granting access to approached pictures. Results of the assessments were then compared in reinforcer assessments to determine if using pictures with and without access to approached stimuli accurately identified high and low preference items.

1. Phase 1: Comparing preference assessment formats

1.1. Experiment 1: preference assessment

1.1.1. Method

1.1.1.1. Participants, settings, and materials. Five young men with developmental disabilities participated in the study. The participants were students at a private residential school for individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities. All students had been receiving residential educational services for most of their lives due to level of support necessary to make educational progress and the severity of challenging behaviors. The participants were chosen because ongoing preference assessments were needed to identify potential reinforcers for skill acquisition programs and interventions for the reduction of challenging behavior. Andrew was a 17-year-old male with autism, who communicated both verbally and through a picture communication system. Andrew's challenging behaviors were self-injurious behavior (SIB) in the form of hand biting, tantrums, perseveration, and aggression. Bryce was a 17-year-old male with autism and Dandy Walker Syndrome, who communicated verbally. Bryce's challenging behaviors were aggression, environmental destruction, perseverative speech, and disrobing. Derrick was a 17-year-old male student with autism, who communicated through a picture communication system, modified sign language, and verbal approximations. Derrick's challenging behaviors were aggression, SIB in the form of hand-to-head and head-to-object, and tantrums. Luis was a 16-year-old male with autism, who communicated through a picture communication system, modified sign language, and verbal approximations. Luis' challenging behaviors were aggression, environmental destruction, and elopement. Stewart was a 15-year-old male with autism who communicated through a picture communication system. Stewart's challenging behaviors consisted of aggression and hand-to-head SIB.

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