

## TEACHING HONESTY - AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO STEALING

L. Ruddick and B. Brua

### Introduction

With the closure of mental handicap hospitals, community services are becoming increasingly concerned with a variety of challenging behaviours which require non-aversive and positive approaches to reduce or eliminate them. Behaviours which are relatively infrequent, such as aggression or stealing are particularly difficult to address with standard reinforcement procedures (Van Houten and Rolider, 1988). Stealing is a challenging behaviour which can cause considerable difficulties for the thief and those who work and live with him. Any object which disappears is assumed to have been taken by that person; the individual is shunned and is seldom trusted to be alone with attractive objects. When individuals repeatedly steal from those with whom they live, the thief may be totally rejected.

Despite the threat that stealing presents to centred communal living for people with learning disabilities, few reports exist on interventions. Altering consequences appears to be the most predominant intervention described in the literature. Azrin and Wesolowski (1974) described the use of an over-correction procedure in a hospital ward for people with severe learning disabilities, whereby the thief was required to return the stolen item plus an identical item to the victim. A more punitive approach was reported by Van Houten and Rolider (1988). They attempted to suppress stealing and hoarding behaviour of a seventeen year old girl with multiple disabilities by guiding her through a recreational behavioural sequence and immediately implementing the consequences. Page *et al.*, (1983) reduced the stealing of food in a woman with severe learning disabilities by providing tokens for periods of non-stealing. More recent

\* **Loraine Ruddick (Assistant Psychologist)**  
Solihull Healthcare, Community Psychology, 4 Downing Close, Knowle, Solihull B93 0QA  
**Betsy Brua (Clinical Psychologist)**  
South Worcestershire Community Trust

\* For Correspondence

approaches (Ivimy and Card, 1985), recommend an approach using group work as a forum for people to develop a better understanding of abstract concepts such as ownership.

In line with Page *et al.* (1983), the present case study illustrates the use of a hierarchy of opportunities for the individual to be rewarded for honest behaviour. Structured situations were designed to promote the minimal chance of failure following the procedures of 'errorless learning'. LaVigna and Donnellan (1986) refer to such procedures in relation to solving behaviour problems with non-aversive strategies. The present programme includes an additional educative component for the individual to develop a better understanding of ownership and honesty.

## Case History

Mr. R. was a 42 year old man with Down's syndrome who had lived in institutions since infancy. At the age of 33 years, he moved to a rural residential home for 14 people with moderate learning disabilities where he currently resides. He was referred to the Community Team for People with Learning Disabilities for chronic stealing which had occurred prior to the move and continued during the nine years that he has lived in his current home. The stealing behaviour consisted of Mr. R. taking other residents' possessions including books, audio cassettes and ornaments. The frequency of this behaviour varied

from daily occurrences to periods of no detected stealing for up to three months. Periods of high frequency stealing created a lack of trust within the home, which affected the attitudes of staff members and other residents towards Mr. R. Initial assessment showed that during the previous week Mr. R. had taken 45 books and ten other objects that did not belong to him. These items were found in Mr. R.'s wardrobe. Mr. R. also kept his own possessions in his wardrobe. He had no personal belongings on display in his room.

Previous approaches used by the residential staff had been unsuccessful in changing the behaviour. These included: reprimanding; removing a possession from Mr. R. for each item found that did not belong to him and encouraging other residents to express their anger towards Mr. R. As an alternative an "Honesty Programme" was devised.

## The Honesty Programme

### *Structure of specific sessions for reinforcement of appropriate behaviour*

1. In collaboration with Mr. R's keyworker a series of 30 situations for practising 'honest behaviour' were designed and ordered in the form of a hierarchy based on use of a particular room and time spent in the room. The desired behaviour was defined as Mr. R. being able to be left alone in a room and not taking objects without seeking permission from the owner. Objects that were considered as tempting included

stationary equipment, books and audio cassettes, all items that Mr. R. regularly took for himself. Three rooms were chosen for the programme:

- a. The kitchen - defined as an 'easy room' containing a few tempting objects.
- b. The lounge - defined as a 'moderate room' containing more tempting objects.
- c. The day activities room - defined as a 'difficult room' containing many tempting objects.

Time spent in any room was measured by minutes. The shortest acceptable time was one minute, and the longest was 20 minutes. The situations were carefully graded in order of increasing difficulty by comparing one situation with another, in an attempt to ensure that Mr. R. would be successful.

2. Mr. R. had three opportunities each day to practice one situation. A success rate of two out of three sessions entitled Mr. R. to move on to the next, slightly more difficult situation. If two successes were not achieved, a more simple situation was introduced.

3. At the end of each session, staff asked "Were you honest?" - thus providing an opportunity for Mr. R. to declare any objects he had taken without permission. Praise was given for Mr. R. displaying honest behaviour. In addition, staff reinforced the meaning of honesty with comments such as "Well done. You were really honest by not taking anything."; or by asking Mr. R. to give his definition of honesty. Mr. R.'s responses were recorded in the daily notes.

4. Mr. R. kept his own chart displaying successes. This was completed at the end of each situation and shown to other members of staff for positive social reinforcement.

5. If objects were taken by Mr. R. outside these structured sessions they were to be returned to the rightful owner as unobtrusively as possible. This was to avoid giving any attention to the undesired behaviour.

6. The intensive programme of three sessions a day over a one month period was followed by a 'fading-out' period lasting two months. This consisted of using only the most difficult situation (twenty minutes in the day activities room) gradually reducing the number of times this was practised from three times a day to once a week.

7. A certificate of honesty was awarded one month after the final successful session.

#### *Teaching the concept of ownership*

At the initial assessment Mr. R. was unable to give a verbal definition of 'honesty' or 'ownership'. On occasions when he had taken objects that did not belong to him, Mr. R. had shown signs that he believed those objects did belong to him once they were in his possession. This belief may have been supported through the practice of communal living. In Mr. R.'s home some ornaments, books, furniture and domestic appliances belonging to everybody in the house. It was felt that teaching the concept of ownership would help improve

Mr. R.'s understanding of a simplified definition of honesty. A number of teaching methods were used:

1. Each day a member of staff asked Mr. R. to look after one of their possessions. Staff praised Mr. R. for being honest when he returned the possession on request.
2. One afternoon a week was set aside for activities whereby Mr. R. was required to choose from a number of objects those that belonged to him and those that belonged to others.
3. Mr. R.'s belongings were listed in an inventory that was frequently updated by Mr. R. and his keyworker.

### Outcome of Programme

Mr. R. quickly became very enthusiastic about the programme, reminding staff when he was due for each session and appearing to enjoy recording success on the chart and receiving praise. Mr. R. was successful in all of the thirty steps of the hierarchy. Towards the later stages of the programme, Mr. R. was able to provide a more valid definition of honesty - *"It's when you are good and don't take anybody's things, but you can ask them."*

The honest behaviour evident within these sessions appeared to generalise to his everyday life with no detected stealing. Midway through the programme Mr. R. spontaneously put his possessions on display in his bedroom. This was viewed as a positive indicator that Mr. R. was becoming more secure and confident with his understanding of

ownership. It was also reported that the relationships between Mr. R. and other residents and Mr. R. and staff members had improved and that Mr. R. appeared more happy and relaxed.

There was no specific maintenance programme following the intensive programme. However, on occasions Mr. R. has been positively reinforced for maintaining his honest behaviour. There have been no detected stealing episodes to date, one year after the withdrawal programme.

### Discussion

The present study illustrated a non-aversive, individually designed approach to a challenging behaviour using a combination of shaping and rewarding the desired behaviour and an educational approach. The intensive programme using a hierarchy of situations of increasing difficulty and an educational approach gave frequent opportunities to teach and aid understanding of the appropriate alternative behaviour.

Mr. R.'s success in every session may be attributed to a number of factors. Careful grading of each situation within hierarchy was contingent upon ensuring success. This was enhanced by building upon the most rudimentary situation and introducing more simple situations if necessary. The involvement of staff in developing and reviewing the progress of the programme, and close monitoring at each stage contributed to its consistent implementation.

Ownership is a difficult concept to learn in a communal setting. Mr. R. had difficulties in distinguishing objects that belonged to him, objects that belonged to others and objects that did not belong to any particular person. This difficulty was addressed by using experiential teaching activities to teach the concept of ownership. Mr. R.'s understanding of this concept seemed to improve. This may go some way to explain why the 'honest' behaviour appeared to generalise and why Mr. R. maintained his honesty after the withdrawal of the intensive programme. Relationships improved between Mr. R. and the staff and Mr. R. and other residents as the stealing episodes diminished and trust developed.

Changes in Mr. R.'s attitudes to staff, work and other residents may have been partly due to the attention he received in course of the programme which was reinforced on an intermittent basis after the programme was faded out. These improvements could be viewed as further positive by-products of the programme and teaching activities.

Strategies used in the present case study could be adapted and applied to other specific challenging behaviours. In using a multi-component approach with others, as with any intervention, it is important to consider the individual's personal characteristics and the specific situation in which the problem behaviour is occurring. Presland (1989) stresses a number of behaviours in addition to stealing such as public masturbation, stripping and self-exposure that are

little investigated in people with learning disabilities. Further investigation and research into specific challenging behaviours would be useful.

## References

- Azrin, N. H. and Wesolowski, M. D. (1974). Theft Reversal: An Overcorrection Procedure For Eliminating Stealing by Retarded Persons. *Journal of Applied Behaviour Analysis*, 7, 577-581.
- Ivimy, R. and Card, H. (1985). "That's Stealing". *Community Care*, 7, 19-21.
- LaVigna, G. W. and Donnellan, A. M. (1986). *Alternatives to Punishment: Solving Behaviour Problems with Non-aversive Strategies*. New York: Irvington Publishers, Inc.
- Page, T. J., Stanley, A. E., Richman, G. S., Deal, R. M. and Iwata, B. A. (1983). Reduction of Food Theft and Long-Term Maintenance of Weight Loss in a Prader-Willi Adult. *Journal of Behavioural Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, 14, 261-268.
- Presland, J. L. (1989). *Overcoming Difficult Behaviour*. Kidderminster: BLMH Publications.
- Van Houten, R. and Rolider, A. (1988). Recreating the Scene: An Effective Way to Provide Delayed Punishment for Inappropriate Motor Behaviour. *Journal of Applied Behaviour Analysis*, 21, 187-192.