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Laboratory Lore and Research Practices in the Experimental Analysis of Human Behavior[1]

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Growing interest in experimental analyses of human behavior has augmented the importance of describing its "laboratory lore" and research practices. "Laboratory lore" refers to the informal and miscellaneous collection of facts, assumptions, and techniques regarding the conduct of experimental research. This series of papers describes the laboratory lore and research practices of experimental analysts of human behavior. Topics include selecting subjects, designing session logistics, developing instructions, selecting reinforcers, and using subjects' verbal reports. These descriptions are offered as a step toward developing improved procedures for conducting research with human subjects.

Key words: Laboratory Lore, Research Practices, Experimental Analysis of Human Behavior, Subject Selection, Session Logistics, Instructions, Selection of Reinforcers, Design of Experimental Contingencies, Verbal Reports

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The experimental analysis of behavior has been based largely on the use of nonhuman animals as research subjects. In recent years, however, interest in studying human behavior has grown considerably, as evidenced by the number of journal articles, presentations at meetings, and reference works concerned with the experimental analysis of human behavior (see Buskist, 1987, pp. 6–7; Davey and Cullen, 1988; Johnston and Pennypacker, 1980).

Although the database accumulated with nonhuman subjects has been a valuable guide to studying human behavior, it has been less useful in suggesting the details of experimental protocols that may be appropriate for human subjects. Researchers using human subjects face numerous problems that researchers using nonhuman subjects do not. These include: identifying relevant subject characteristics; designing sessions around time constraints imposed by the academic calendar and circumstances of the subjects' private lives; developing instructions that acquaint subjects with the apparatus and experimental task without interfering with experimental (noninstructional) contingencies; selecting reinforcers for nondeprived subjects; and interpreting or otherwise using subjects' verbal reports.

Few conventions presently exist for dealing with these and similar issues. What does exist however, is a good deal of "laboratory lore" that, by definition, is largely unrecorded. "Laboratory lore" refers to that informal and miscellaneous collection of facts and assumptions concerning experimentation that is usually communicated in oral rather than written form. This lore emerges from the collective experiences of individual researchers as they tinker with numerous experimental details in an effort to develop more effective experimental methods. This leads to an unorganized but nonetheless increasingly effective set of research practices that play an important role in the development of the experimental analysis literature that focuses on problems requiring human subjects.

The present series of papers attempts to document common research practices and associated laboratory lore in five general areas critical to conducting behavior-analytic research with humans: (a) Se-

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[1] These papers stemmed from a symposium held at the 11th annual convention of the Association for Behavior Analysis, May 1985, Columbus, OH. W. Buskist was the chair of the symposium and edited the papers for publication. Because of the number of papers in this collection, each was limited in the length available to it. Special thanks to Samuel M. Deitz, Alan Baron, and Philip N. Hineline for their insightful editorial comments and to Richard DeGrandpre, Clyde Hodge, David Morgan, and Dudley J. Terrell, who read and commented on earlier versions of the manuscript. Reprints may be obtained from either author, Psychology Department, Auburn University, Auburn, AL 36849-5214.

lecting subjects, (b) designing session logistics, (c) developing appropriate instructions, (d) selecting reinforcers, and (e) using subjects' verbal reports. Although these papers in some cases touch upon the experimental literature that has evolved concerning certain methodological practices, their primary focus is on reporting apparently ubiquitous research practices.

Our discussion of these topics highlights three general conclusions regarding experimental analyses of human behavior. First, many informal research practices, such as subject selection procedures and the design of session logistics and instructional regimens, appear to have unknown but possibly significant effects on the kinds of dependent variables generally studied in behavior analytic research with humans. Second, researchers studying human behavior should be encouraged to describe practices such as subject recruitment procedures, instructional protocols, reinforcer selection criteria, and solicitation of subjects' verbal reports in as much detail as is supplied regarding other methodological considerations in their reports. Third, data produced by experiments that directly examine the behavioral effects of these informal research practices are likely to yield more sophisticated methodologies than are currently available and significantly advance our understanding of human behavior, rather than merely improving our research techniques.

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