An Examination of Treatment Wording on Treatment and Therapist Acceptability

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Introduction and Research Questions

It has long been assumed that the words we use when describing treatments may affect treatment acceptability and adherence (e.g., Bailey, 1991; Woolfolk, Woolfolk, & Wilson, 1977). In fact, the 4th edition task list of the Behavior Analysis Certification Board states that applied behavior analysts must be able to "explain behavioral concepts using everyday language (lay terms)." There is minimal empirical research; however, that examines the effect of how treatments are described on treatment acceptability or adherence. Much of the research that has been done has focused largely on teachers or undergraduates (e.g., Hyatt & Tingstrom, 1993; Katz, Cacciapaglia, & Cabral, 2000; Kazdin & Cole, 1981) with mixed results.

Jarmolowicz and colleagues (2008) examined the effect of language on treatment integrity and found that direct care staff members implemented an intervention more effectively when a non-technical description of the intervention was provided compared with technical language. Rolider and colleagues found that technical language was less acceptable and understandable for the "general public" compared to interventions described in conversational language (Rolider, Axelrod, & Van Houten, 1998).

This study examines parent perceptions of a commonly prescribed behavioral intervention (time-out) that is presented via video by the same therapist but using three different descriptions. Parents presenting to an outpatient behavioral health clinic with their children were randomly assigned to one of three time-out description conditions: 1) technical terminology, 2) non-technical terminology, or 3) popular terminology. Participants watched a video of the therapist describing time-out and then completed a survey of treatment and therapist acceptability, as well as their comprehension of the procedure. There were three research questions:

1. Does the language a behavior therapist uses when describing an intervention to a parent affect that parent's acceptability of the intervention?
2. Does the language a behavior therapist uses when describing an intervention to a parent affect that parent's perception about therapist qualities?
3. Does the language a behavior therapist uses when describing an intervention to a parent affect that parent's comprehension of the intervention?

Participants and Setting

- 74 Parents presenting to an outpatient pediatric behavioral health clinic completed the measure.
- The pediatric behavioral health clinics were located in urban, suburban and rural locations.
- 49 of the parents were between 30-50 years old, 12 above 50 years old, 12 below 50 years old.
- The majority (63) were Caucasian.
- 40 of the Children were between 7-12 years old, 13 were 13 years or older, and 19 were 6 years or less.

Method

- Three different written descriptions of time-out (technical, non-technical, popular) were validated by a sample of behavioral clinicians and parents.
- Three videos were created of the same therapist providing each of the time-out descriptions.
- Parents of children receiving services in the outpatient pediatric behavioral health clinic were recruited to watch a video of a therapist on an iPad describing a behavioral intervention.
- Parents were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions: technical, non-technical, or popular terminology.
- Parents completed four measures on the iPad:
  - Treatment Evaluation Inventory (9 items)
  - Therapist Evaluation Inventory (9 items)
  - Therapist Qualities Rating Scale (9 items)
  - Comprehension Measure of Time-out Steps (free response)

Results

- Parents rated the therapist and treatment acceptable regardless of the intervention wording.
- Perhaps parents seeking help for their children are prone to find interventions and therapist acceptable regardless of how the intervention is presented.
- Parents were better able to describe time-out steps accurately in the nontechnical condition suggesting that they may be more likely to implement time-out effectively compared to parents in the technical or popular terminology conditions.
- The relationship between treatment acceptability, therapist acceptability and treatment adherence is undetermined (e.g., Sterling-Turner & Watson, 2002) and how the words we use affects these issues also remains unclear.
- It is important that behavior analysts continue to examine how what we say affects what people do.

Discussion

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References