

## **My Ultimately Disastrous Attempt to Operantly Condition Sex**

**Although sex may not be the only unconditioned reinforcer controlling my behavior; it is powerful. Obviously there are many other unconditioned reinforcers for which I would work. There is that slice of steaming hot pizza; that glass of cold water after a hard workout; or, one of my true favorites, a pitcher of beer after a tough final. There are even some conditioned reinforcers like money that have stronger effects. Although these others are effective, it is hard to ignore sex!**

**A recent change in my life made me think about manipulating my environment to maximize the amount of sex I received. After being in a monogamous relationship for four years, instances of sex between my partner and me were never lower. I knew that the low rate was not due to sex losing its value for me. This was painfully obvious in my daily attempts to engage in the behavior that were not reciprocated by my partner. In fact, being sex deprived made sex more valuable for me. In contrast, it seemed to make sex less valuable for my partner. Perhaps sex was even becoming somewhat aversive because she avoided it. The situation needed changing.**

**I first conducted informal ecobehavioral and ABC assessments to identify any contingencies controlling my partner's behavior. I observed her**

and recorded the frequency of sex, the incidents immediately preceding sex, and sex's consequences. I found we were having sex once a month after putting a child to bed. The behavior only occurred after the child had finished his homework and I had read a story to him. Immediately following sex I would fall asleep.

It became clear to me that sex was not a reinforcer for her at all. It was a behavior that needed to be reinforced! To be absolutely sure of the reinforcers I asked, "Dear, tell me if you could have me do anything more often than I do now, what would that be?"

"Oh that's easy. Give me back rubs," she replied. "You used to give me back rubs all the time when we were first dating."

"OK, besides back rubs what else would you like?" I asked. I was trying very hard to conceal my intentions.

"You used to listen to me so much more. I mean you still listen, but you used to listen like you really were interested."

"So you want me to listen more?" I said looking at her.

"Yes! I want you to listen more and talk to me more and give me back rubs more and spend more time with me. That's all I want."

"That's all hey?" I asked with a laugh.

"Yes."

I was now prepared to implement the procedure. I began by using a

continuous reinforcement schedule. Every instance of sex was immediately followed with a back rub. She seemed flabbergasted that I didn't simply roll over and fall asleep as usual! When I coupled the back rub with questions about her job, she immediately talked about her workday and politics at her office. It was quite amazing how absolutely receptive she was to everything I did. After just one trial, the target behavior occurred again the following night. That hadn't happened for a year!

We soon were having sex three times a week. For some weeks the rate was even higher. Occasionally sickness or an unexpected event would alter the frequency, but for the most the frequency of sex was steady. This new contingency was creating a reciprocal contentment between us and we were even getting along much better in the other aspects.

In hindsight it was laziness that led to my experiment's downfall. If I had simply left the contingency in place and continuously reinforced the target behavior all would have been well. Instead, I decided to thin the reinforcement schedule from a continuous schedule to a variable- ratio schedule in which I reinforced on average every third sexual episode.

The first week of this new schedule went off without a hitch. I could tell she wasn't as thrilled, but now I could get to sleep at a reasonable hour. After several weeks though, she began acting strangely and I saw a sharp drop in the frequency of our sex.

**“What’s wrong?” I asked. “You’ve been acting lately like there is something bothering you.”**

**“There is,” she replied. “I feel like you are trying to manipulate me. Like you only do things for me when you want something in return.”**

**“What do you mean?” I asked uneasily.**

**“I just get the feeling that the only thing you care about is sex, and the only reason you even give me the time of day is to get sex. Is that it? Tell me. Is that the case?”**

**Of course that was not the case. It may have appeared as such to her, but I did truly love and care about her deeply. I tried to explain how we are all motivated to do things that bring us reinforcement. An inviting smile from someone, a person saying thank you, a soft kiss, a warm embrace, these all serve to reinforce what we do. Would any of us behave in the same way without them? I chose simply to manipulate those contingencies to make each of us happier. In the end she did not see it that way and she promptly threw me out of the house, never to speak to me again.**

**Such is my experience using behavioral procedures to enhance my romantic life. Next time, I’ll do my best to keep a dense schedule of reinforcement in effect.**