

Holistic Observation: Expanding the Lens of Behavior Analysis

Purpose

This assignment is designed to enhance students' observational skills by immersing them in the complexities of natural environments while capturing subtle contextual details and qualitative factors. Traditional Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) training often emphasizes recording antecedent, behavior, and consequence (ABC) sequences in isolation, potentially overlooking the broader environmental context. Naturalistic observation, a method extensively utilized in psychology, involves observing subjects in their natural settings without intervention, providing a more comprehensive understanding of behavior as it unfolds in real world contexts.

By engaging in this form of observation, students can develop a deeper appreciation for the environmental and contextual factors that influence behavior, moving beyond the constraints of structured ABC data collection. This approach addresses common skill deficits among novice analysts, particularly their limited experience with quiet, reflective observation. By focusing on the environment as a whole, without categorizing specific antecedent, behavior, or consequence sequences, students can cultivate a more holistic perspective, essential for effective behavior analysis.

This assignment is worth 30 points.

Observation Guidelines

- Observe a public or semi-public environment for 30 minutes (e.g., a park, café, library).
- Document observations thoroughly as they are happening, focusing on the physical environment, human interactions, behavioral patterns, and personal reflections. This document will be submitted with your final report (if notes are hand-written, they must be submitted as typed). This document has no grammatical, spelling, or structural expectations, but any distracting typos should be corrected, and the document should be easy to read (An example is provided at the end of these instructions).
- Write a post-observation report (3–5 pages) following the specified format.
 - Introduction. Provide justification regarding your observational setting and the time of day. It is ok to identify that the time selection was a convenience sample – but if it was strategically selected for a rich, behavioral environment, please indicate.
 - Descriptive Summary. The descriptive summary is a more narrative format from your raw observations, providing an overall coherent and organized pattern of documentation. In this portion of the paper, include as many descriptions related to as many senses as possible. Students may also describe a casual description of behavioral interactions that can later be analyzed using behavioral concepts.
 - Analysis. In this portion of the paper, students will reflect on the descriptive summary and some of the examples they provided. These examples should then be related to behavior analytic concepts discussed in the course (or in previous classes). Remember, this is to generate careful considerations of what was observed as it relates to behavioral phenomena. We cannot accurately identify maintaining consequences observed during this period; rather, we make hypotheses and generate areas to study more systematically.
 - Conclusion. In this section, take one example from the analysis and suggest something that could be studied. For example, a student may notice people picking up merchandise in one area

more than another and suggest collecting rate of purchased items based on product placement. Finally, indicate your overall experience with this project.

- **Ethical Considerations.** Respect the privacy and dignity of individuals who are observed. Avoid any interaction or documentation that could make someone uncomfortable or violate ethical boundaries. If visiting a business, respect their policies regarding loitering. In the post-observation report, ensure that no identifying or personal information is divulged.

Peer Review Component

After completing the assignment, students will be provided with a peer's project to review. Your thorough and honest evaluation is crucial for your peer's learning process. Ensure that your feedback is respectful, constructive, and aimed at helping your peer improve their analytical and observational skills in behavior analysis.

Students will be responsible for:

- Completing the rubric and submitting it to eLearning in a timely manner.
- **Plagiarism Policy.** Academic dishonesty will result in an automatic review by the instructor. If plagiarism is confirmed, consequences may include a zero on the assignment or further disciplinary action as per university policy.
- If the instructor suspects that a dyad has misrepresented each other's work, they will both receive a "U" on the assignment.

Peer Review Rubric

Item	Met all expectations 5 Points	Met partial expectations 2 points	Did not meet expectations 0 points
Observation Document	Document is submitted, is easy to read, appears to be the correct length, and indicated the location and time of the observation.	One expectation in this category was missing	Not submitted.
Observation Report Introduction	The introduction included a justification for the location selection and an explanation for the time interval selected.	One expectation in this category was missing.	Not included or more than one expectation in this category was missing.
Observation Report Descriptive Summary	The descriptive summary included a structurally sound narrative of the raw observations, including at least (3) examples of highlighting specific interactions or sensory elaborations.	Two expectations in this category were missing <i>(each example counts as 1 expectation, so there are 4 total expectations)</i> .	Not Included or more than two expectations in the category were missing.
Observation Report Analysis	The analysis section included at least (3) behaviorally identified phenomena from the observations.	One of the expectations in this category was missing.	Not Included or more than one expectation in this category were missing.
Observation Report Conclusion	One example from the analysis was selected for intervention and personal statement of the observation experience was included.	One of the expectations in this category was missing.	Not Included or more than one expectation in this category was missing.
Ethical Considerations	No personally identifying information was included in the report.		Personal Identifying information was included in the report.
Total			

Example of Raw Observation Document

This is an example of how simple the observations should be. Please be aware, this is only about a 5-minute observation period and your observations should be about (4) times longer.

Name: Mya Rudolph

Location: Starbucks

Observation Time: Start 12:37 PM – 1:42 PM

- The door swings open, and a cold draft blows in.
- A man in a gray hoodie walks in, looking at his phone.
- There's a faint smell of coffee and something sweet—maybe cinnamon rolls?
- The barista is calling out a drink order, "Grande caramel macchiato for Sarah!" No one responds.
- A toddler in a bright yellow jacket runs to the display case, pointing at the cake pops.
- The sound of milk steaming is loud, hissing, and drowns out some conversation.
- A woman at the corner table is typing furiously on her laptop; she has a half-empty iced coffee next to her.
- The sunlight comes in through the large windows, making the space feel warm, but the air conditioning is still running.
- A man in a business suit is standing at the counter, tapping his foot. He keeps checking his watch.
- The line is about five people long. Someone at the back is scrolling through their phone.
- A group of teenagers near the entrance is laughing loudly; one of them is holding a frappuccino with whipped cream and chocolate drizzle.
- Someone drops a coin near the register—it makes a loud clink, and the man in the gray hoodie bends down to pick it up.
- The barista behind the counter asks, "What size for the latte?" while writing on a cup.
- The chair next to me squeaks as someone pulls it out. A woman sits down and places a book on the table—hardcover, red cover, looks like a novel.
- The smell of toasted bread wafts over—someone must have ordered a panini.
- The toddler in yellow is now crying loudly; the parent is kneeling down, trying to hand them a snack.
- A man walks by with a Starbucks bag, and the logo is green against the white bag.
- The music in the background is soft—acoustic guitar, maybe. It's barely noticeable over the noise.
- The woman on the laptop looks frustrated; she sighs and runs a hand through her hair.
- The man in the business suit is now at the counter, handing over cash.
- Someone behind the counter drops a spoon, and it clangs on the floor.

End Sample. Continues for a few more pages

Post Observation Report Example

Introduction

For this observation, I selected a Starbucks during lunchtime, a setting known for its high foot traffic and diverse customer base. I aimed to explore how environmental variables and human interactions might influence behaviors in this context. Lunchtime at Starbucks provides a rich variety of behaviors, from casual social interactions to goal-directed tasks such as ordering and preparing drinks. The goal was to capture the "big picture" by documenting observable behaviors and contextual factors like temperature, lighting, and auditory stimuli.

Descriptive Summary

The Starbucks environment was bustling, with a steady stream of customers entering and exiting. Despite the warm sunlight streaming through large windows, the air conditioning maintained a cool interior. Aromas of coffee and toasted bread filled the air, occasionally accented by sweet hints of cinnamon.

The auditory landscape was dynamic: the hiss of steaming milk, background acoustic music, and overlapping conversations created a lively yet slightly chaotic ambiance. Baristas moved swiftly behind the counter, calling out orders. Some customers appeared impatient; notably, a man in a business suit tapped his foot while frequently checking his watch.

In one corner, a woman typed rapidly on her laptop, intermittently sighing and running her hand through her hair, suggesting possible frustration. Nearby, a group of teenagers laughed loudly, drawing attention as one held a frappuccino adorned with chocolate drizzle. A toddler in a bright yellow jacket excitedly pointed at the cake pops in the display case, later crying loudly when their parent attempted to distract them with a snack.

I noticed subtle environmental cues designed to influence behavior. For instance, merchandise strategically placed near the counter seemed to encourage impulse purchases, highlighting how environmental arrangements can act as antecedents, subtly shaping customer behavior.

Behavioral patterns emerged throughout the observation. Customers in line often engaged in phone scrolling or foot-tapping, likely signaling impatience. Social interactions varied from polite exchanges at the counter to boisterous group conversations at tables. The spatial arrangement encouraged small clusters of people at tables, while the counter area facilitated more transactional behaviors.

Observing the baristas' seamless coordination underscored the concept of behavioral chains. Their efficiency in handling complex orders likely stems from repeated practice and reinforcement, emphasizing the importance of task analysis and chaining in mastering complex skills, applicable in both clinical settings and everyday job functions.

Analysis

The Starbucks environment serves as a microcosm for examining several fundamental ABA concepts: From a behavioral perspective, the Starbucks environment presents a complex interplay of antecedents, behaviors,

and consequences. For instance, the long line and wait times likely served as antecedents for behaviors such as foot-tapping, phone-scrolling, and sighing, which could be forms of escape or self-soothing.

The parent attempting to console the crying toddler demonstrated an immediate response to escape an aversive stimulus (the child's crying). The transactional nature of the counter area fostered short, goal-directed interactions, while the seating area allowed for longer, more social engagements. Environmental variables like noise level and lighting may have indirectly influenced the duration and type of interactions customers engaged in.

The baristas' proficiency in managing customer orders and preparing beverages is indicative of behaviors that have been shaped over time through differential reinforcement. Initially, new employees likely receive reinforcement for approximations of the desired skills (e.g., correctly steaming milk), with reinforcement becoming more contingent on precise performance as competence increases. This process exemplifies shaping, where successive approximations toward a target behavior are reinforced until the desired behavior is achieved.

The sequence of tasks performed by the baristas—taking orders, processing payments, preparing drinks, and serving customers—constitutes a complex behavior chain. Each step functions as both a conditioned reinforcer for the previous behavior and a discriminative stimulus for the subsequent one. Mastery of this chain is essential for efficient service delivery and is typically achieved through training methods such as forward or backward chaining, where individual components of the chain are taught sequentially until the entire sequence can be performed proficiently.

The interactions between customers and staff are rich with examples of verbal behavior, including mands (requests), tacts (labels), and intraverbals (conversational exchanges). For instance, a customer stating, "I'd like a grande latte," is emitting a mand that specifies the desired item. The barista's response, "One grande latte coming up," serves as an intraverbal, maintaining the flow of conversation and facilitating the transaction. Understanding these verbal operants is crucial for analyzing communication patterns and designing interventions to enhance language skills.

The standardized menu and consistent branding across Starbucks locations create a network of stimulus equivalences for customers. For example, the sight of the Starbucks logo, the layout of the menu, and the appearance of specific beverages all function as equivalent stimuli that evoke similar responses from customers, such as ordering a preferred drink. This consistency aids in customer learning and decision-making, as they can reliably predict the outcomes of their choices based on prior experiences, demonstrating the principles of equivalence-based instruction.

Conclusion

After watching the sequence of tasks completed by the baristas, it became apparent that certain interruptions to the chain could decrease time for order completion. For my study, I would like to place blender to the right of the register and measure the duration of task completion for drinks using the blender. I suspect that when baristas cross behind the cashier, there are often interruptions in the chain, causing a delay in drink completion. I would be using an antecedent intervention and could test between locations.

***Students will also add 1 – 3 sentences reflecting on their experience with this assignment. Answers will vary**