

I know you know what I said;  
But do you know that what I said is not what I meant?

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When supporting troubled/troublesome people it can be challenging to understand why they behave as they do. While it is natural to want to focus on eliminating troublesome and irritating behavior, a positive approach would be to look for the adaptive function the behavior serves, or the meaning of the behavior and teach a more acceptable but functionally equivalent alternative response. Analytical techniques have been developed to understand the unique meanings of the behaviors of troubled/troublesome people. And when we can teach functionally equivalent responses, responses that achieve the same functional outcome, troublesome behavior will decrease.

Mary was placed in an institution when she was 12 years old. She was believed to be extremely suicidal. While living in the institution she frequently talked and wrote about suicide. She lived there for four years until a community-based residential program agreed to accept the challenges she presented. At the community-based site she lived with teacher/counselors who worked a four-days-on, three-days-off tour of duty. So the same people were with her around the clock. At first they responded to her suicide threats literally — as if she would act as she talked. They talked with her about why she was so upset and why she wanted to hurt herself. As they got to know Mary more and saw her in different situations, they began thinking of the suicide threats in a different way. Since the teacher/counselors were living with Mary, they knew what was happening throughout her day. When she would begin to talk about suicide or would write a suicide note, they did not talk to her about suicide or about feeling bad about herself, but thought about the circumstances surrounding the suicide talk and asked her questions about what had been happening. They discovered that Mary had various problems that she didn't know how to solve, and to get people to help her she would talk or write about suicide. They discovered that she didn't know how to problem solve. So instead of talking with her about feeling suicidal, they would coach her on how to identify her problem, choose an effective solution, and act on it. It was then that the suicide threats stopped.

Most of us tend to have learned that people *literally* mean what they say. We tend to learn that when someone says she is feeling depressed and wants to hurt herself that she is in fact actually depressed and might really hurt herself. When someone says he is hungry, he in fact is and wants to eat. We learn to expect a predictable correspondence between behavior and its meaning, or its purpose. There is an old saying, "If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and talks like a duck, then it must be a duck."



For troubled/troublesome people, and especially those with disabilities that interfere with communication, there can be a variety of circumstances that confound things. We assume that all behavior has meaning, but the meaning for a troubled/troublesome person may not be what our experiences would lead us to think. So it becomes important for us to learn new ways of discovering the meaning of behavior. Look again at the duck, but a different way. Turn the picture so that the 'beak of the duck' points upward. Could it be a rabbit? Look at the beak as the ears of a rabbit, and the bottom indentation on the head as the mouth of a rabbit. Just because it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and talks like a duck, doesn't necessarily mean it is a duck. When looked at from a different perspective it looks like a rabbit. There is an old 'mind teaser' expression:

*I know you think you know what I said, but what you don't know is that what I meant is not what I said.*

A respectful relationship involves starting with the assumption that we cannot take for granted what behavior means and that we need to discover the adaptive purpose of even the most troublesome behavior. Phil Quinn (1984) wrote about his experiences growing up in abusive families. He started his story with:

*"Most people who knew me as a child and adolescent thought my behavior deviant, maladaptive, or pathological. By their standards they were right. By most standards they were right. But by the only standard that mattered to me then—the standard of survival—they were wrong. Given the circumstances in which I lived, most of my thinking and behavior was not only appropriate, but a necessary adaptation for self-preservation."*

To understand the meaning of another's behavior, we must first learn to look at that person's behavior from his or her perspective. "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view — until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee, 1960). Given a troubled person's unique life experiences and learning style, how can we interpret his or her behavior? When we are not sure what a person's behavior means, or what purpose the behavior serves for that person, there are a group of related techniques we can use to discover the meaning of behavior. The techniques have been referred to as *hypothesis testing*, with the best known examples being *active listening* and *functional analysis*. To understand how hypothesis testing is used, it may be useful to look at how the techniques are related to one another and to review examples of each. Hypothesis testing to discover the meaning of behavior involves three steps:

- Assess: look for occurrences of a behavior and the circumstances surrounding the behavior's occurrence;
- Hypothesize: speculate about the meaning of the behavior, or the adaptive function it serves; and

- Test: set up test situations in which the behavior **should** occur if the hypothesis is correct, and test situations in which the behavior **should not** occur if the hypothesis is correct. If the behavior occurs when you predicted that it would not, or if it doesn't when you predicted it should, then the hypothesis is wrong.

To assess the meaning of behavior we can find instances of the behavior by:

- questioning informants who have spent a lot of time with the person and have been able to observe the person in lots of different situations;
- questioning the person directly about his or her own behavior; and
- directly observing the person engage in the behavior.

When trying to discover the meaning of behavior, we start out by collecting information about the behavior so that we can form an hypothesis, opinion, or best guess about what the behavior means. Sometimes this comes from being with a person, observing their behavior over time, and slowly beginning to form an opinion that some actions may mean something different than what we would typically expect those actions to mean. At other times, hypothesizing may be instantaneous. A person does or says something, and we immediately have an opinion about what was meant. In these cases we have directly observed the person engage in the behavior.

At other times the function of a behavior may be elusive to those who have directly observed it. When we are puzzled by or disagree on the function of a behavior an *structured interview with informants* who have spent a lot of time with the person and have been able to observe the person in lots of different situations can facilitate generating hypotheses. For example, O'Neill, Horner, Albin, Storey and Sprague (1990) developed a *functional analysis interview*. The interview includes questions designed to identify the context in which a challenging behavior occurs. The questions go over (1) a careful definition of the behavior of concern; (2) potential ecological events that may affect the behavior (e.g., medications, medical complications, sleep cycles, diet, daily schedule, predictability, personal activities, presence of other people, outcomes of actions); (3) events and situations that seem to predict occurrences of the behavior (e.g., time of day, setting, with whom, during what activity); (4) what happens for the person when the behavior occurs (possible functions of the behavior); (5) how efficient is the behavior; (6) what are the primary methods used by the person to communicate; (7) what events, actions, objects are thought to be positive for the person; (8) what "functionally equivalent alternative" behaviors are known by the person; and (9) the history of the undesired behavior and the strategies that have been attempted. Answering all of the questions can help the informant(s) form an hypothesis of the function a troublesome behavior serves for an individual.

Sometimes it is possible to directly interview the person engaging in the troublesome behavior. Examples of this strategy are presented later.

Assessment gives us the information on which to base a *working hypothesis* or 'best respectful

guess' about what purpose a challenging behavior serves. A useful hypothesis can be stated in terms of what a behavior accomplishes (the outcome) for an individual in a given situation (antecedent events) [e.g., 'when a stranger gets too close to Joe, he engages in self-abuse until the stranger moves away']. Sometimes it is more helpful to phrase an hypothesis as if there is a communicative function for the behavior (e.g., Joe's head banging means that you are physically too close to him and he wants you to move away). Phrasing the hypothesis as if there is a communicative function helps us to more readily identify what behavior to teach the person. But before assuming that we understand the purpose of a troublesome behavior, we need to confirm that the hypothesis is correct by testing it.

To test our hypothesis we can use *passive* strategies like:

- descriptive analysis: identify different situations which allow us to answer the question, "does the behavior only happen in the situation in which we thought it would, and not in other situations?" and then observe what the person does when the situation occurs.

Or we can use *active* strategies such as:

- active listening: ask the person questions like, "do you mean . . .?"
- and functional analysis.

*Descriptive analysis* is a passive strategy that involves careful observation of what a person does in situations that would be pivotal to the hypothesis. Joe is a young man who was banging his head and grabbing others' hair. After observing him for some time, the people around him formed a working hypothesis that both of these behaviors functioned to control who was around him and how close they got to him. To confirm their hypothesis, they then paid careful attention to what happened in contrasting situations. They observed that Joe banged his head when strangers were in the room and not when people with whom he was very familiar were in a room with him. They also observed that if anyone came close to him rather suddenly and without warning that he would bang his head or reach out quickly and grab their hair. On the other hand, if familiar people approached Joe gradually and started a conversation before getting too close, then he did not bang or grab. Observation of these consistent correlations led people to accept the hypothesis that head banging and hair pulling served as ways to escape from social encounters with 'strangers' or sudden social encounters; they could be thought of as communicating, "stranger, you're too close," or "oh, you frightened me."

Descriptive analysis is a passive strategy and does not directly confirm or validate an hypothesis. It simply points out correlations or associations of behaviors with certain situations and suggests that an hypothesis may be the correct one. For example, there can be subtle but critical aspects of a situation that observers miss because they were focused on discovering situations that confirmed a strongly-held hypothesis. An *active test of a hypothesis* provides a more definitive answer. One strategy, active listening, depends upon an individual's communication skills while

the second strategy, functional analysis, does not and is particularly useful when a person's communication skills are not effective.

Thomas Gordon (1970) described *active listening* as using many of the skills counselors had developed, not to counsel an individual, but to understand the meaning of the individual's behavior. Active listening involves repeating back to a person your interpretation of his or her actions or words and asking for some form of agreement or disagreement. While active listening can take many forms, most simply described it is a question in the form of, "Do you mean...?"

For example, a teacher/counselor described a case in which Tom, a boy she was caring for, came into the house from playing outside after school and asked, "When are we eating?" Initially, the teacher/counselor had assumed that Tom literally meant what he said, and answered, "In a few minutes." Tom would become upset and repeat his question over and over until the teacher/counselor told him to stop repeating himself.

Active listening involves not acting on an assumption or an interpretation of what was meant, but presenting the assumption to the child to determine if the teacher/counselor understands. Instead of immediately answering Tom, the teacher/counselor learned to ask questions for clarification, e.g., "Are you hungry now? Are you asking how long can you play outside? Do you want to go somewhere?" This gave Tom the opportunity to tell her whether she understood correctly. He might have answered, "I want to do something fun." Given this description of what the child meant, the teacher/counselor was able to provide an answer that better met his needs, "Dinner will be ready in a few minutes and after we have finished dinner and cleaned up the kitchen we can go to the park." When the teacher/counselor used active listening, not only did she better understand Tom, but he would not become upset and repeat himself over and over. Active listening is different from the passive listening we typically engage in and involves actively questioning our interpretation of what we heard or saw.

Horner (1996) described a somewhat more structured interviewing strategy. Through a sequence of questions the person is asked to identify when he or she engages in the troublesome behavior, what happens at those times just before the person engages in the troublesome behavior, and what is the outcome of engaging in the behavior (what happens immediately afterwards). Some people are able to self-observe and report on their own behavior so that an interviewer can analyze the functions of their behaviors.

Even when a person cannot answer because of a communication disability or due to heightened emotional arousal that is disruptive to the person's communication skills, we can still use active listening and watch the person's reaction. Many people can understand what is said to them even when they are not able to express themselves clearly. Changes in their actions may provide us with answers to our questions. For example, Dave gestures and makes vocalizations that are difficult to understand. At first his teacher/counselors made assumptions, e.g., that he was hungry, and gave him something to eat. He might have started to eat it but then threw the food at them. When they used active listening it looked something like this: When Dave gestured and vocalized, a teacher/counselor thought about what he wanted and asked him by both stating a

question and showing him what she meant; she might have said, "Are you hungry; do you want a banana?" and handed him the banana. If he didn't reach for the banana or show any other sign of wanting it, she would have realized that he might not be hungry but wanted something else. She could have asked him if he wanted a drink and showed him something to drink. If he again showed no interest in the drink but continued to gesture and vocalize, she would have realized that she still did not understand what he wanted and tried something else. She might have asked him if he wanted to go outside and taken him to the door. If he then went outside and seemed content, she might assume that is what he wanted. While the teacher/counselor cannot be positive that Dave was trying to communicate that he wanted to go outside, his behavior indicated that it was the better choice among those that she presented. And she was teaching him that she was willing to listen *actively* to his communication efforts.

Conducting a functional analysis in the form of *function probes* (Evans and Meyer, 1985) can validate, or prove an hypothesis. Function probes involve arranging for the occurrence of contrasting situations to actively test the function of a behavior. For example, when asked to complete chores, Mike would throw his toys and swear at his foster parents using very vulgar statements. Generally he was very sullen and would not answer when asked why he was upset. The typical routine was that Mike had a set of chores that he needed to complete each day. The foster parents began testing a series of hypotheses for the functions of the 'tantrums.' They started with the assumption that he did not like the parent who was making the requests (troublesome behavior often feels like an attack on the caretaker and it is easy to assume that the function of a behavior is to escape from or avoid the caretaker). To test this hypothesis the parents took turns asking Mike to do his chores. Mike demonstrated that he was just as likely to swear at either parent and invalidated the initial hypothesis. The parents then speculated that the chores were either too difficult, took too much time, or there were too many. They tested each of these possibilities by alternating their requests to do one chore versus many chores, to do easy chores versus difficult or time consuming chores. They discovered that Mike was capable of completing his chores whether requested in isolation or as a group of tasks to be completed. The foster parents next speculated that Mike didn't like to be disrupted from a play activity with a parental request. To test this hypothesis, the parents created a list of chores and required Mike to choose which ones to complete each day and when. They alternated this arrangement with their own requests to do chores. They discovered that there were many fewer outbursts when Mike chose when to complete the chores his parents assigned to him. They learned that they needed to teach him to negotiate what was being requested of him (a functionally equivalent behavior) rather than throw toys and swear.

One behavior can often serve many functions. For Mike one function was to escape or delay disruption in his play. Since the tantrums continued to occur occasionally in other contexts, the parents continued to identify other functions that tantrums served for Mike. They discovered that Mike would sometimes engage in a tantrum as he came in the door from school. Initially the parents speculated that these particular tantrums were associated with poor scores on his daily school report, but his behavior proved not to be consistent with this hypothesis. Upon further questioning, the parents discovered that Mike was being teased by older boys on his school bus when they found out that he had a school report with poor scores. This was a negative

experience for Mike and through a *descriptive analysis* the parents discovered he would tantrum at home once he was out of harm's way from the older boys. His tantrums only occurred when he was teased on the bus. A functionally equivalent response for Mike was learning to describe negative experiences to adults who could advise him on new ways to act when negative experiences (e.g., teasing) occurred.

Our typical experiences may lead us to see a duck when something walks like a duck and talks like a duck. Our experiences may lead us to assume that a troublesome behavior "means" for another what it would mean for us. A respectful relationship with a troubled/troublesome person starts with 'climbing into his skin and walking around in it' and is based on the assumption that challenging behavior serves a useful, valid function for that person. Our role is to understand that function and help the person learn a more acceptable but functionally equivalent response.

In other words, duck, it's a rabbit.

#### Footnote

1. Artwork: source verified as unknown.

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