Behavioral Assessment: BACS 511  
Fall 2015  
Applied Behavior Analysis and Clinical Science (ABACS)

Mission Statement: Anchored in the pragmatic liberal arts tradition, the department of health professions educates students to become effective and innovative health and behavioral professionals who will satisfy the growing demand for their services.

General Information
Instructor: Sarah Slocum, M.S., BCBA  
Class Time: Wednesdays, 6:45 – 9:15 pm  
Class Location: Bush 202  
Office: Stewart House  
Office Hours: Wednesdays 5:00 – 6:45 or by appointment

Content
This course aligns with the assumption that most behavior is operant (i.e., evoked by the environment and maintained because of changes in the environment). We will focus on the determinants (functional characteristics) of responses. These approaches are classified under an umbrella term of “functional behavioral assessments” (FBAs).
   1. Functional or experimental analysis  
   2. Descriptive or naturalistic analysis  
   3. Indirect or anecdotal methods

Course Objectives
As a result of completing this seminar, students will be able to:
1. Describe the general field of experimental psychopathology, including its historical basis, general themes, and methodologies.  
2. Describe the common learned functions of problem behavior.  
4. Describe the distinctive features, strengths, and limitations of indirect, descriptive, and experimental approaches to behavioral assessment.  
5. Describe the logic of test-control methodology in identifying determinants of problem behavior.  
6. Describe the most common limiting conditions of experimental approaches to assessment and procedural variations that have been developed to address them.  
7. Discuss ethical issues surrounding the use of experimental approaches to assessment.  
8. Describe fundamental, reinforcement-based approaches to behavior reduction and why their application requires knowledge of behavioral function.  
10. Develop a research proposal that extends current knowledge about the functional analysis of problem behavior.
Readings
We will be mostly reading empirical research pertaining to assessment, with some textbook chapters embedded throughout. Most of the articles will be from the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, and are available freely online through the Olin Library Databases (specifically PsycInfo). I will put any articles that are difficult to find on blackboard about 1 week prior to the course.

Format
1. **Critiques:** You will be asked to submit a two-page critique of an empirical article each week (1-inch margins, double spaced, 12-point Times New Roman). I will assign these at the end of class each week. I provided what these should look like at the end of this syllabus. This should contain a 2-3 sentence summary, *strengths and weaknesses*, as well as future-research directions. These are due **Monday** prior to class; I will not read them late.
2. **Quizzes:** Each week, you will have a two-question quiz to make sure you are reading carefully. Please bring paper. This will be completed in the first 5 min of class.
3. **Lecture:** I will then begin with a brief lecture of what we read for that week. This won’t always happen, but earlier in the semester, it will happen more.
4. **Discussion:** We will then spend almost all of the remaining class time in discussion. I will randomly select a student to summarize the reading and suggest some interesting “ideas” they had while completing the reading. Please become comfortable with summarizing the article in about 5 sentences. These will likely help guide the discussion of the course, so try to select topics that you find interesting (seeing as others will likely have thought those topics were interesting too). I will not formally grade you on this, but it will be expected.
5. **Closing Comments:** I will close the week with a brief overview of the upcoming readings, including important information that will help you to better understand the readings. I will also assign critiques at this point (remind me if I don’t!).
6. **Final Exam:** There will one final exam that we will have the last day of class. You will have the full course time to take this exam; likely, you will need additional time beyond the 2.5 hours. The topics for the exam will be based on everything you have learned throughout the semester. We will discuss it in more detail as we get closer to the exam time.

Grading
1. **Weekly Critiques** will be graded based on a 10-point scale. Please use the handout for editing comments/tips. That will strongly impact your grade for each assignment. I expect that you will correct errors suggested one week to the next. You will be more severely penalized for repeat mistakes. There will be 13 of these, and I will take your highest 12 grades for **100** points total. These will really help guide our discussions as well, so think about that as you are writing them.
2. **Oral summaries** and class participation will not be graded each week so much as I will determine a grade at the end of the course based on your participation each week. This will be **25** points towards your final grade.
3. **Quizzes** will be 2-points each and I will take your 10 highest grades (out of 12). This will allow for absences, etc. You will not be able to make these up. These will total **20** points.
4. **Final Exam** will count as **100** points.
Course will be out of 245 points:
- A – 220 and higher
- B – 196 and higher
- C – 172 and higher
**Rollins College Policies**

- **Disability Statement:** Rollins College is committed to equal access and does not discriminate unlawfully against persons with disabilities in its policies, procedures, programs or employment processes. The College recognizes its obligations under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 to provide an environment that does not discriminate against persons with disabilities. If you are a person with a disability on this campus and anticipate needing any type of academic accommodations in order to participate in your classes, please make timely arrangements by disclosing this disability in writing to the Disability Services Office at (box 2764) 1000 Holt Ave., Winter Park, FL, 37289 or call 407-646-2345 for an appointment.

- **The Academic Honor Code:** Membership in the student body of Rollins College carries with it an obligation, and requires a commitment, to act with honor in all things. Because academic integrity is fundamental to the pursuit of knowledge and truth and is the heart of the academic life of Rollins College, it is the responsibility of all members of the College community to practice it and to report apparent violations. The following pledge is a binding commitment by the students of Rollins College: The development of the virtues of Honor and Integrity are integral to a Rollins College education and to membership in the Rollins College community. Therefore, I, a student of Rollins College, pledge to show my commitment to these virtues by abstaining from any lying, cheating, or plagiarism in my academic endeavors and by behaving responsibly, respectfully and honorably in my social life and in my relationships with others. This pledge is reinforced every time a student submits work for academic credit as his/her own. Students shall add to all papers, quizzes, tests, lab reports, etc., the following handwritten abbreviated pledge followed by their signature: “On my honor, I have not given, nor received, nor witnessed any unauthorized assistance on this work.” Material submitted electronically should contain the pledge; submission implies signing the pledge.

- **Four-Hour Justification Statement:** This course is a four-credit-hour course that meets two and a half hours per week. The value of four credit hours results from work expected of enrolled students both inside and outside the classroom. Rollins faculty require that students average at least three hours of outside work for every hour of scheduled class time. In this course, the additional outside-of-class expectations are:
  - Course readings
  - Supplemental readings
  - Preparation for oral summaries
  - Consideration of course participation and topics for discussion in class
  - Writing assignments
  - Preparation for weekly quizzes
  - Preparation for final exam

- **Course And Instructor Evaluation:** At the end of each semester, students are asked to evaluate the course and instructor. These evaluations are extremely valuable in the teaching and learning process on our campus. Student evaluations help assess student perceptions of classroom learning and often lead to improved teaching. Your feedback is important and Rollins students are encouraged to be honest, fair, and reflective in the evaluation process. The online evaluative survey is anonymous. Students are never identified as the respondent. Instead, each student’s comments are assigned a random number. You will be asked to rate your course and instructor on a numerical scale and through narrative comments. The online Course and Instructor Evaluation (CIE) process opens at 8:00 a.m. on the first scheduled date. It remains open for a period of 14 days (2 weeks) until 12:00 a.m. (midnight) on the final scheduled date. The evaluation period ends prior to the start of final examinations and faculty cannot access completed evaluations until 10 days after the end of final exams. Students will receive one email at the start of the CIE period, one after the 15th day, and a final reminder the day before the CIE period ends. Students who complete evaluations for all classes will be able to view grades ten-days before students who do not complete an evaluation form.
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Overview (August 26th)

Introduction to Assessment (September 2nd)

Experimental Analysis: General Models (September 9th)

Supplementary

Design Variations to the Original Functional Analysis (September 16th)

**Supplementary**


**Variations in Antecedent and Consequent Events (September 23rd)**


**Supplementary**


**Out-of-Class Assignment (September 30th)**


Everyone will either…

a) Submit a 2-page (critique-length) summary of one FABA presentation, and discuss how the presentation related to assessment. **Due:** the Monday after FABA (Monday 5th along with the following week’s critique).

b) Read the above article and write a 2-page critique. **Due:** the Monday before FABA (September 28th).

**Descriptive Analysis (October 7th)**


**Indirect (Anecdotal) Methods (October 14th)**


**Nonhuman applications (October 21st)**


**Assessment in Health Care (October 28th)**

- Reading to come. I’m open to suggestions…

**Intervention Strategies (November 4th)**


**Problem Behavior Maintained by Social Sr+ (November 11th)**


**Problem Behavior Maintained by Social Sr- (November 18th)**


**NO SCHOOL NOVEMBER 25th – Thanksgiving**

**Problem Behavior Maintained by Automatic Reinforcement (December 2nd)**


**December 9th – FINAL EXAM**
This article discusses diagnoses of aggressive behavior in dogs, such as fear-related or food-related aggression, as well as the management of that behavior. Reisner (2003) provides a list of safety issues and medical considerations when treating aggression in dogs. She concludes by describing some behavior-modification techniques, drug therapies, and surgical therapies.

Reisner (2003) nicely outlines the importance of this research in the second paragraph, stating the risks associated with this type of behavior and the high prevalence of aggression in dogs. Another strength of this article is the application of operant techniques to aggressive behavior in dogs. The author says the “reason” (p. 304) dogs engage in aggressive behavior is the key to understanding the behavior and thus managing that behavior. Therefore, the author agrees with the underlying framework of functional analyses.

A third strength of this article is the use of behavioral concepts. For instance, Reisner (2003) discusses the difference between escape and avoidance behavior, suggests social-anxiety behaviors are types of social-avoidance behaviors, recommends antecedent-behavioral interventions (i.e., avoiding high-risk settings), and suggests some aggression might be attention seeking. Although she does not describe these concepts in behavioral terms, Reisner does recommend operant learning is somewhat responsible for aggressive behavior in dogs.

Despite these strengths, this article has several weaknesses. First, the author uses mentalistic descriptions. Reisner (2003) explains that anxiety and fear in dogs must be considered. This is problematic because it takes the focus off of the external causes of behavior (i.e., the environment) and makes the cause internal (i.e., a personality flaw). Further, the author claims that because of an underlying component of fear, we cannot distinguish one form of aggression from another. The focus should be on environmental causes that can be altered as opposed to the personality of a dog that can be difficult to change.

Second, Reisner (2003) states aggression labeled based on the target is more objective than aggression labeled based on the function, which I believe is incorrect. Two people could just as easily disagree about the usual target of behavior as they could about why behavior occurs. More important, behavior is directed at
someone because that person has historically created a change in the environment that increases a dog’s aggression, not because of the person’s identity. If a functional analysis were performed with two different people running sessions, I would imagine the behavior would occur in the condition that maintains problem behavior, regardless of the therapist.

Third, Reisner (2003) makes several statements not supported by data. For instance, she claims owners who understand that biting stems from a “state of worry” (p. 308) are less likely to respond with punishment, and further, that punishment does not work and actually makes a situation worse. She might be talking specifically about highly aggressive dogs who are not socialized, but this is contrary to evidence suggesting punishment is effective at reducing behaviors. Reisner also says behavioral interventions should be a last resort. The author might be suggesting that responding to aggressive behavior retrospectively as opposed to preventatively is more problematic; however the statement still is not supported by data. Evidence for these claims should have been provided.

Future research should evaluate traditional functional-analysis methodology on aggressive behaviors in dogs. Medical problems should be ruled out first, and safety precautions should be taken to ensure the person evoking problem behavior is not injured. For instance, the therapist could run sessions from behind a window or could wear protective equipment. Additionally, latency to aggression could be used to evaluate these procedures. Allowing the behavior to occur once might be all that is acceptable because the behavior is so severe.