

*THE CONTROL OF THE CONTENT OF CONVERSATION  
THROUGH REINFORCEMENT*

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A recent study found that the opinions expressed by a speaker could be increased or decreased by a listener who agreed or disagreed with the speaker or remained silent. This finding using student experimenters was a major practical and theoretical extension of operant reinforcement principles. A replication of the procedure produced the same statistically significant results but also unanticipated indications of problems. A series of additional studies was therefore conducted to examine these findings. The results showed that student experimenters consistently "found" that agreement (reinforcer) increased opinions and that extinction (disagreement or silence) decreased opinions, but that these results were reported to please the instructor. Advanced psychologists who were not in a student-teacher relation did not obtain these results. Students who were given the expectation that agreement with opinions would result in a decrease, rather than an increase of opinions, reported a decrease. Direct evidence was obtained of gross unreliability of recording and confessed fabrication of the data reports. These results demonstrate the importance of objective recording and programming and interobserver reliability as prerequisites for credibility of a study even when the usual criteria have been satisfied of statistical significance, practical importance, and theoretical coherence.

REVIEWER'S COMMENT

The appearance of this article in 1961 provided a clear warning to applied behavioral researchers. That warning, I think, was largely heeded. I have been puzzled that this article has, to my knowledge, never been cited in any JABA article. Since its message is still relevant (and in some quarters badly needed), I am delighted that JABA is bringing it to the attention of the present generation. Furthermore, I am gratified at this clear evidence that JABA and JEAB are still speaking to each other.

EDITOR'S COMMENT

As this reviewer points out, this important article has been only infrequently cited in the behavioral literature. This fact prompted us to ask the authors to allow us to reprint this article in JABA.