

# Functional Analysis: Decoding Why We Do What We Do

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Functional analysis in behavioral psychology is the application of the laws of operant conditioning to establish the relationships between stimuli and responses. To establish the function of a behavior, one typically examines the "three-term contingency": identifying the antecedent or trigger of the behavior, identifying the behavior itself as it has been operationalized, and identifying the consequence of the behavior which continues to maintain it.

Functional analysis in behavior analysis employs principles derived from the natural science of behavior analysis to determine how behavior relates to the environment. A functional analysis of behavior requires that data be collected on changes in the dependent variable (behavior) that occur as a result of the direct manipulation of independent variables (antecedents and consequences); therefore, functional analysis of behavior should not be confused with functional assessment procedures such as ABC assessments because they do not involve the direct manipulation of independent variables and the use of experimental designs.

### **Applications in clinical psychology**

Functional analysis and consequence analysis are commonly used in certain types of psychotherapy to better understand, and in some cases change, behavior. It is particularly common in behavioral therapies such as behavioral activation, although it is also part of Aaron Beck's cognitive therapy. In addition, functional analysis modified into a behavior chain analysis is often used in dialectical behavior therapy.

There are several advantages to using functional analysis over traditional assessment methods. Firstly, behavioral observation is more reliable than traditional self-report methods. This is because observing the individual from an objective stand point in their regular environment allows the observer to observe both the antecedent and the consequence of the problem behavior. Secondly, functional analysis is advantageous as it allows for the development of behavioral interventions, either antecedent control or consequence control, specifically designed to reduce a problem behavior. Thirdly, functional analysis is advantageous for interventions for young children or developmentally delayed children with problem behaviors, whom may not be able to answer self-report questions about the reasons for their actions.

Despite these benefits, functional analysis also has some disadvantages. The first that no standard methods for determining function have been determined and meta-analysis shows that different methodologies appear to bias results toward particular functions. Second, Gresham and colleagues (2004) in a meta-analytic review of JABA articles found that functional analysis did not produce greater effect sizes compared to simple contingency management programs. Third, while functional analysis has been applied to a host of populations (i.e.) much of the current functional analysis research has been limited to children with developmental disabilities.

## Professional organizations

The Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) also has an interest group in behavior analysis, which focuses on the use of behavior analysis in the school setting including functional analysis.

Doctoral level behavior analysts who are psychologists belong to the American Psychological Association's division 25 - Behavior analysis. APA offers a diplomate in behavioral psychology and school psychology both of which focus on the use of functional analysis in the school setting.

The World Association for Behavior Analysis offers a certification for clinical behavior therapy and behavioral consultation, which covers functional analysis.

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