REINFORCEMENT SURVEY SCHEDULE

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1. Core Definition

The **Reinforcement Survey Schedule** (RSS), often referred to simply as a Reinforcer Survey or Reinforcement Checklist, is a formal, indirect assessment instrument utilized primarily within the framework of behavior therapy and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). Its fundamental purpose is to systematically gather comprehensive information from a subject regarding the activities, objects, or social interactions that they find inherently enjoyable, motivating, or rewarding. This form typically requests detailed input concerning specific stimuli that the individual perceives as positive, thereby establishing a pool of potential high-probability events or items that can function as effective reinforcers when applied contingently to target behaviors. The data collected from the RSS serves as a foundational element in the development of highly individualized and effective treatment plans, allowing the clinician to move beyond general assumptions about what motivates the client and focus instead on empirically derived preferences.

The structured format of the RSS ensures that a wide array of potential reinforcers is systematically evaluated, maximizing the likelihood of identifying stimuli potent enough to modify behavior. In clinical practice, the successful implementation of any behavior modification program hinges directly upon the potency and relevance of the reinforcers employed. If the identified reward is not genuinely valued by the subject, the contingency created--where a desired behavior leads to the reward--will fail to increase the frequency of that behavior. Therefore, the survey acts as a critical preliminary step, translating subjective enjoyment into objective, actionable therapeutic tools. This process greatly assists behavior therapists in structuring precise behavioral contracts and contingency management strategies, ultimately enhancing positive behaviors while concurrently working to reduce or extinguish maladaptive ones.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings: Operant Conditioning

The conceptual basis of the Reinforcement Survey Schedule is deeply rooted in the principles of Operant Conditioning, a paradigm established and elaborated upon by B.F. Skinner. Operant conditioning posits that behaviors are learned and maintained through consequences; specifically, behaviors followed by rewarding stimuli (reinforcers) are more likely to occur again in the future. The RSS is designed specifically to solve the practical problem inherent in applying this theory: determining what constitutes a reinforcing stimulus for a particular individual at a particular time. Since reinforcement is defined functionally (by its effect on behavior, not its inherent nature), the therapist must first hypothesize potential reinforcers before testing them. The survey provides this

initial hypothesis set.

Furthermore, the use of the RSS is consistent with the Premack Principle, often called the "Grandma's Rule," which states that a high-probability activity (one the subject enjoys and frequently engages in, identified via the survey) can be used to reinforce a low-probability activity (the target behavior). By identifying highly preferred activities through the systematic questionnaire, therapists gain access to powerful motivational variables. For instance, if the survey reveals that video games are a high-preference activity, access to video games can be made contingent upon the completion of homework (a low-preference activity), thereby increasing the desired academic behavior.

This theoretical link emphasizes **individualization**. Unlike interventions that assume universal reinforcers (e.g., money or praise), the RSS acknowledges that reinforcing efficacy is highly idiosyncratic and context-dependent. What is rewarding to one individual may be neutral or even aversive to another. By gathering detailed self-report data, the therapist ensures the treatment plan is tailored to the subject's current motivational state, maximizing the intervention's effectiveness and overall therapeutic efficiency.

3. Structure and Administration of the Survey

While specific versions of the Reinforcement Survey Schedule may vary (e.g., the Reinforcement Survey Schedule-Revised, specific adolescent versions), they generally follow a standardized format designed to categorize preferences across multiple domains. These instruments typically combine forced-choice questions, rating scales (e.g., Likert scales measuring preference intensity), and open-ended queries to capture a comprehensive picture of the subject's enjoyable stimuli. The structure often breaks down potential reinforcers into distinct categories to ensure no area of interest is overlooked, such as edibles, activities, social interactions, and material goods.

Administration can be conducted in several ways, dependent on the client's age, cognitive ability, and communication skills. For verbal adults and older adolescents, the survey is often administered as a written, self-report questionnaire, maximizing confidentiality and allowing for thorough consideration of responses. For younger children or individuals with developmental delays, the RSS may be adapted into a structured interview format, sometimes supplemented by visual aids or picture choices, administered by a therapist or caregiver. Crucially, the interviewer must maintain a neutral stance and ensure the subject understands that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers, encouraging honest reporting of genuine preferences rather than socially acceptable ones.

The raw data generated by the RSS is typically quantified. Responses are often scored to produce a rank-ordered list of preferred items or activities. This ranking is immensely valuable because it not only identifies what the subject likes but also establishes a hierarchy of preference. This

hierarchy guides the therapist in selecting the most potent reinforcer for the most difficult target behaviors, ensuring that the reward is commensurate with the behavioral requirement. Furthermore, it helps establish a diverse "reinforcer menu," which is essential for preventing **reinforcer satiation**, a common challenge where a reward loses its potency through overexposure.

4. Key Categories of Potential Reinforcers

The questions within a robust Reinforcement Survey Schedule are strategically organized to elicit information about different motivational pathways. Identifying the type of reward is as important as identifying the reward itself, as different categories of reinforcement may be more effective in specific environments or for particular target behaviors.

The typical categories systematically explored include:

Social Reinforcers: These stimuli involve interactions with others. The survey queries preferences for specific types of social attention, such as verbal praise (e.g., "Good job"), physical affection (e.g., hugs, high-fives), specific privileges (e.g., leading a group activity), or focused, non-contingent attention from preferred adults or peers.

Tangible Reinforcers: This category covers material goods or physical items. Questions focus on preferred foods (edibles), toys, books, electronics, or collecting specific items. These are often easy to deliver immediately following a behavior but must be managed carefully to avoid dependency on extrinsic rewards.

Activity Reinforcers: Based strongly on the Premack Principle, these are enjoyable activities that can be accessed contingently. Examples include access to television, specific games, outdoor play, listening to music, or participation in hobbies. The survey aims to identify both high-frequency, short-duration activities and longer, special activities.

Sensory Reinforcers: Particularly relevant in populations with sensory processing differences (such as individuals with autism spectrum disorder), these involve stimuli that provide specific sensory feedback, such as rocking, specific textures, visual stimulation (lights), or specific sounds.

Escape/Avoidance Reinforcers (Negative Reinforcement): While technically identifying negative reinforcement, the survey may indirectly assess stimuli or situations the subject finds aversive. The opportunity to escape or avoid these aversive stimuli (e.g., stopping a difficult task, leaving a crowded room) can function powerfully to increase the behavior that led to the escape.

5. Application in Contingency Management

The primary clinical significance of the data derived from the Reinforcement Survey Schedule lies

in its direct translation into practical **contingency management** plans. Once the hierarchy of preferred reinforcers is established, the therapist can formally articulate the "if-then" rule that governs the behavior change. This formalized relationship is often expressed as a **contingency contract**, detailing the specific performance criteria required from the client and the exact nature and timing of the reinforcing consequence.

The reliability of the RSS ensures that the chosen reinforcer is genuinely motivating, thereby increasing the fidelity of the intervention. In educational or clinical settings, the survey helps staff members or parents deliver consistent reinforcement. For instance, if a child's survey indicates that five minutes of free time with a tablet is their top preference, the teacher can confidently use this reward knowing it is likely to be effective immediately following the completion of a challenging math assignment. This systematic approach transforms vague motivational efforts into precise, replicable behavioral science.

Furthermore, the RSS aids in maintaining the longevity of the intervention. By identifying a broad spectrum of reinforcers, the therapist can rotate the rewards used, preventing the client from becoming habituated or bored with a single reward. This rotation keeps the motivational system dynamic and robust. A carefully managed reinforcement program, based on high-quality survey data, is thus essential for achieving sustained behavioral change rather than merely temporary compliance.

6. Limitations and Need for Validation

Despite its utility, the Reinforcement Survey Schedule is classified as an **indirect assessment** method, meaning it relies entirely on verbal report (self-report or informant report) rather than direct observation of behavior. This reliance introduces several significant limitations that must be addressed by the supervising clinician. The primary criticism is the potential for inaccuracy or discrepancy between reported preference and actual reinforcing efficacy. A subject might claim they enjoy reading classical literature (socially desirable response) when, in reality, watching cartoons (actual functional reinforcer) is far more potent.

Additional limitations include the subject's cognitive ability to accurately identify and articulate preferences, particularly in younger or cognitively impaired populations. Subjects may misunderstand the questions, lack self-awareness regarding their own motivations, or simply invent responses. To mitigate these inherent flaws, therapists almost always use the RSS as a hypothesis-generating tool, not a definitive assessment. The results of the survey must subsequently be validated through **direct preference assessment** or **reinforcer assessment**, which involve observing the subject's behavior when given contingent access to the hypothesized reward. If the behavior increases, the hypothesis is confirmed; if not, the item is discarded despite the survey results.

7. Comparison with Direct Preference Assessment

To overcome the limitations of the indirect RSS, behavior analysts typically pair the survey with direct assessment procedures. Direct preference assessment involves presenting the subject with selected items from the survey list and observing their choices and interaction patterns in a controlled environment. Common direct methods include Multiple Stimulus Without Replacement (MSWO), Paired Stimulus (PS) preference assessments, or Free Operant observation.

The key distinction is function versus report. The RSS identifies items the subject *says* they prefer (stated preference), while direct assessment identifies items the subject *acts* to obtain or consume (demonstrated preference). For example, if the RSS suggests that a particular toy is highly preferred, a subsequent MSWO assessment might show that the subject consistently chooses a different item when given the choice, suggesting the first toy is not as motivating as reported. Ideally, the RSS efficiently narrows down the vast universe of potential reinforcers to a manageable set, which is then empirically tested using direct methods, leading to a highly reliable and potent final list of effective rewards.

Further Reading

Behavioral therapy (Wikipedia)
Operant Conditioning (Wikipedia)
Premack Principle (Wikipedia)
Cooper, J. O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (2020). *Applied Behavior Analysis* (3rd ed.). Pearson Education.