

*THEFT REVERSAL: AN OVERCORRECTION PROCEDURE FOR
ELIMINATING STEALING BY RETARDED PERSONS¹*

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To deal with the problem of stealing, an overcorrection procedure was designed in which the thief was required to give his victim an item identical to the stolen one in addition to returning the stolen item. This procedure was compared with the more commonly used simple correction procedure (restitution) in which the thief is required to return the stolen item. Under the simple correction procedure, an average of 20 thefts per day had been occurring among 34 retarded residents of an institution. The overcorrection procedure reduced the thefts by 50% on the first day, by 75% on the second day, and eliminated thefts by the fourth day, after which no further stealing occurred. The overcorrection procedure was a rapid and effective method of eliminating stealing, it provided special consideration for the victim, and it should be applicable to the nonretarded.

Stealing is a widespread social problem that has received extensive attention in rehabilitation efforts and in law. Experimental evaluations of specific procedures or programs for reducing thefts, however, have been rare or have indicated that the procedures have little or no effect (Jeffery, 1969). Study of stealing is usually complicated greatly by the problem of detection of the theft. The profoundly retarded person, however, often steals in an obvious manner with little concern for concealment, and therefore constitutes a population where theft-prevention programs can be evaluated more easily and for whom theft is an urgent problem. Two theft-deterrent procedures have been experimentally evaluated with profoundly retarded persons. Barton, Guess, Garcia, and Baer (1970) temporarily removed food during mealtime from the resident when he stole food from another retarded person in an institutional dining room. This timeout from reinforcement reduced stealing by only 57% over a period of 24 meals.

Also using stealing of food by profoundly retarded persons at mealtime, Azrin and Armstrong (1973) evaluated a simple correctional procedure. The thief was required to replace or return to the victim the item that he stole. This simple correction procedure (restitution) also reduced stealing, but its effect on stealing itself was not reported separately, because other deviant behaviors were being modified concurrently. Within 12 weeks, all of the deviant behaviors, including stealing, were virtually eliminated.

Another type of procedure for eliminating stealing can be derived from the overcorrection principle, recently developed for aggressive acts (Foxy and Azrin, 1972), agitative-disruptive conduct (Webster and Azrin, 1972), toilet training (Azrin and Foxy, 1971, 1974; Foxy and Azrin, 1973a, 1973b), enuresis (Azrin, Sneed, and Foxy, 1973), and autistic behaviors (Azrin, Kaplan, and Foxy, 1973; Foxy and Azrin, 1973c). The overcorrection principle states that a disruptive activity will be discouraged by having the offending person correct the disrupted situation and also overcorrect it. The overcorrection aspect requires the offending person to restore the disrupted situation to a better state than existed before the disruption. As applied to stealing, the disruption is that the victim has been forcibly

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deprived of his property. A simple correction procedure would dictate that the thief return the item to the victim. The overcorrection principle suggests that the thief be required to give the victim more than he had stolen. The present study evaluated the overcorrection procedure as a deterrent for stealing and compared it with the simple correction procedure. For the reasons noted above, profoundly retarded persons were used as the subjects of the study.

METHOD

Subjects

Thirty-four severely and profoundly retarded adult residents in an institutional ward served as subjects. All residents on the ward were included except those who were nonambulatory or otherwise unable to participate in the ward commissary period. Sixteen were male, 18 were female. The average age was 41 yr and the average IQ listed was 15. None of them spoke more than in single words or phrases and most did not speak at all. A high incidence of stealing had occurred among them on the ward, especially at mealtime, and from each other's personal dresser. Consequently, they were closely supervised at meals and their personal property was held in safe keeping. When between-meal commissary periods were initiated, a high level of stealing occurred during those periods and posed a serious question as to whether the commissary periods could be continued.

Experimental Design

A within-subjects experimental design was used. For the first five days, a simple correction procedure was used whereby the trainer required that the thief return the stolen items to the victim. After five days, the thief was not only required to return the stolen item, but also had to give an additional identical item to the victim (overcorrection). This design provided a comparison between the simple correction procedure and the overcorrection procedure. No attempt was made to include a no-intervention condi-

tion because such a condition would be ethically indefensible in that it allowed the victim to be forcibly deprived of his property, even though the employees had observed the theft.

Detection of stealing. The 34 residents were divided into three approximately equal groups; one group at a time took part in the commissary period to ensure easier detection of a theft and to provide time for its correction. Two trainers closely observed the group of residents and independently recorded instances of theft. If one trainer was engaged in correcting an instance of theft, the other trainer continued his observation alone. In the rare circumstance in which another stealing incident was observed while the first trainer was occupied, the second trainer corrected the second theft. The residents usually stole the items in such a blatantly overt manner, by forcibly pulling it from the objecting victim's grasp, that reliability of recording between the two observers was almost perfect. Only one instance of disagreement occurred.

Procedure

The residents entered a room singly and chose, usually by a pointing gesture, which item on display they desired. Almost always, the item was a drink of soda, a candy bar, or a bag of potato chips, which the resident carried to a table and ate while seated in close proximity to other residents. Since a resident was admitted to the room only when the preceding resident was on his way to his seat, the opportunity to steal was available primarily while they were seated together at small tables that accommodated four persons. The commissary period lasted for as long as was necessary for all residents to obtain and eat the snack items, usually about 30 min.

Under the simple correction procedure, the trainer required the thief to return the food item to its owner. He accomplished this by interrupting the thief as soon as a theft occurred and guiding the thief's hands in returning the item. If part of the food item was consumed, as it sometimes was in a sudden grasping-biting movement, the remaining portion was returned after

it was washed if necessary. Under the overcorrection procedure, the trainer required the thief to return the item in the same corrective manner, but, in addition, he guided the thief in securing an additional identical item and giving it to the victim. The offender was required to stand up from the table, to walk the few steps to the display area, to obtain the new item, and to place it in the victim's hands on returning to the table. For both procedures, the trainer reprimanded the thief when detected, instructed him to return or obtain the items, and manually guided him in doing so if he did not react to the instructions.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows that about 20 stealing episodes occurred each day during the simple correction procedure. When the overcorrection procedure was begun, thefts decreased by 50% to 10 episodes on the first day, by 75% to five episodes on the second day, and by 90% to two thefts on the third day. After the third day, no thefts occurred during the subsequent 16 days of observation. A *t* test of differences showed that fewer thefts occurred during the first five days of the overcorrection procedure than during the five days of the simple correction procedure ($p < 0.0001$).

The individual records showed that all but seven of the 34 residents committed at least one theft. For each resident who stole at least once, fewer thefts occurred during the overcorrection procedure than during the simple correction procedure.

Observation of the theft revealed differences in the manner of the theft and in the resident's reaction to detection and to correction. Three of the residents stole only once or twice and only during the simple correction procedure; they usually exhibited a guilty and shamed expression when detected at stealing an item from the display area, in the manner of shoplifting. The other residents typically showed no guilty or shamed expression when their theft was de-

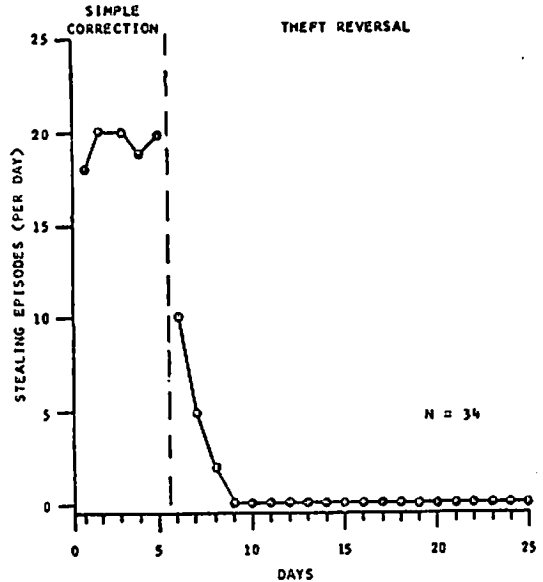


Fig. 1. The number of stealing episodes committed each day by 34 adult retarded residents in an institution. During the five days of simple correction, the thief was required to return the stolen item. During the theft-reversal (overcorrection) procedure (subsequent to the vertical dashed line), the thief was required to give the victim an additional item identical to the one stolen, also returning the stolen item. The stealing episodes consisted of stealing food items from the other retarded residents during commissary periods.

rected. They typically grasped the food item from another resident and made little effort to conceal their action. When they were required to return the item to the victim, they often attempted to destroy it, rather than allow the victim to regain it, as if their goal were to cause distress to the victim, rather than merely to possess the item. The emotional reaction and expression of the victims was usually that of smiling and nodding and other outward indications of pleasure at having the stolen item returned, especially when they received an additional item during the overcorrection procedure. Most of the residents physically resisted the trainer's efforts to have them return the stolen items, but none became aggressive. Two residents returned the stolen item at the trainer's request without manual guidance. When guidance was needed, as it was for almost all thefts by the other resi-

dents, the Graduated Guidance procedure was used. As described in detail elsewhere (Azrin and Foxx, 1974; Foxx and Azrin, 1973b), the trainer guides the individual very gently in an instructive manner during the Graduated Guidance technique.

When a theft occurred, the observers recorded with a stopwatch the time required to complete the correction. The simple correction procedure required an average of 7 ± 2 sec, whereas the overcorrection required an average of 106 ± 17 sec.

DISCUSSION

The overcorrection procedure eliminated thievery by all residents. The decrease was almost immediate and no further thefts occurred after three days. The overcorrection procedure was effective in eliminating thefts, whereas thefts occurred at a high frequency when simple correction was used, a superiority also seen in the treatment of aggressive and disruptive conduct by retarded persons (Foxx and Azrin, 1972). As compared with a previous report (Barton *et al.*, 1970) of a 57% reduction of stealing by a timeout from meals, the present overcorrection procedure reduced stealing by 100% in three days.

The overcorrection procedure for theft was probably effective for the reasons that had originally led to the design of the procedure (Foxx and Azrin, 1972; Webster and Azrin, 1972). The overcorrection procedure: (a) terminated reinforcement for the theft by withdrawing the stolen item, (b) was a negative reinforcer because it required effort when the additional item had to be obtained, (c) constituted a timeout from positive reinforcement, in that the thief was interrupted for a period of time in his other activities, and (d) was re-educative in that the thief practised the positive action of giving snack items to the victims. For all of the residents, the reinforcer for stealing seemed to be possession of the snack item. When the trainer removed this stolen item, that source of reinforcement was eliminated. For the more persist-

ent thieves, the annoyance of the victim seemed to have become another source of reinforcement. By changing the victim's reaction from suffering to pleasure, the overcorrection procedure also eliminated this secondary source of reinforcement. The special concern for the victim embodied in the overcorrection procedure differentiates the procedure from procedures that are primarily punitive, such as timeout.

On a theoretical basis, the theft-reversal procedure can be expected to be effective with nonretarded persons, since the same reasons noted above for the effectiveness of the procedure apply to normal persons. Further, the procedure should be especially effective when the victim is disliked by the thief, since the victim emerges from the overcorrection experience in a happier state, rather than the usual bereft condition.

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