A PROCEDURE FOR REDUCING EXPERIMENTAL DROP-OUTS

ARNOLD E. KAUFMAN

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN—MILWAUKEE

In experimental procedures with human subjects utilizing monetary reinforcement and relatively severe (0-15 ma) electric shock as punishment, a severe problem has been encountered of subject drop-outs and intermittent failures to appear for scheduled experimental sessions. Typical procedure had been to hire experimental subjects in the part-time employment office of the university, with the rate of pay specified as contingent upon performance in the experimental situation. Subjects were paid at the end of each session. Each subject was asked to agree to appear for a minimum of 10 sessions and to finish the entire series. With such a procedure, subjects usually appeared regularly for baseline sessions involving no exposure to electric shock, but often failed to appear for approximately 25% to 50% of later sessions in which shock was regularly programmed.

A new procedure has been initiated which has resulted in 100% attendance in five of six subjects tested thus far. Basically, the procedure places an aversive contingency on drop-outs and failure to appear for scheduled sessions. Subjects are now hired on the same basis as before with the following exceptions. Subjects are given a card on which the amount earned in each session is listed, but the money

is not paid until the last scheduled experimental session is completed. In addition, each failure to appear for a scheduled session results in a subtraction of a specified amount of money, starting with one dollar for the first session missed, and increasing by one dollar for each successive failure to appear. The subject must agree to these provisions before being hired. These contingencies, if applied to an average total earnings of 20 dollars, would result in the subject losing about one-third to one-half of total earnings for three or four failures to appear, the average failure rate encountered in the old procedure. In terms of Weiner's (1963) concept of response cost, this procedure apparently makes the cost of avoiding an experimental session more aversive than the punishment contingencies encountered in the session. The cost contingency was, of course, completely divorced from any behavior in the experimental situation. No change has been noted in behavior in the experimental situation which can be attributed to the new procedure.

REFERENCE

- Weiner, H. Response cost and the aversive control of human operant behavior. *J. exp. Anal. Behav.*, 1963, 6, 415-421.