

Spring, 1995  
What's Missing?!?!  
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The six of us moved into a four-bedroom, East-side flat August 15, 1994: my childhood best friend with her Rottweiler, Rommel; two women with whom I had lived the year before; and a student I knew from a research methods course. I looked forward to our senior year in a new place together. I trusted my roommates and volunteered to have the telephone and electric services connected in my name. I understood that I would ultimately be financially responsible should something go wrong, but I felt comfortable because I knew my friends were dependable.

To my surprise, each month our telephone payment was late. Ameritech sent disconnection notices, and I was stuck negotiating payment arrangements to fix the credit problem. Each month the long distance calls alone, totaled over \$200!

I was puzzled. My roommates held part-time jobs. They always came home with bags of goodies from the mall. Every month they paid their rent promptly. Why couldn't they pay their phone bill on time?

I had been telling my roommates "The phone bill is due on the 20th." Post-it notes on the fridge and message board read "Please pay your portion of the phone bill by the 17th so it can be paid on time." My reminders were ineffective. Frustrated, I scattered the pages of our lengthy bill on the living room floor hoping that my roommates tripping over them would be a reminder.

Short of manually guiding their hands to sign their checks, I did everything I thought possible to modify their behavior. For example, I began computing the monthly bill for each roommate to reduce the effort of paying. However, the money still did not reach the envelope until disconnection notices appeared on our porch!

Behaviorists define a prompt as a discriminative stimulus that is added to the environment to induce a desired response. I didn't realize I had been using prompting all along. Despite my using indirect and direct verbal prompts, the technique was ineffective. My behavioral text noted that "by using a prompt, desired behaviors can be quickly induced with relatively little effort."

What was missing? The behavioral perspective assumes the environment controls behavior, yet I continued looking for inner causes to explain my roommates behaving so poorly. I did not know my roommates to be so irresponsible, rude, and inconsiderate in other matters.

A crucial consideration in using prompts, that the text

failed to emphasize, is that discriminative stimuli are effective only if the prompted behavior is consequted. There was nothing reinforcing about paying on time. Moreover, there was nothing immediately punishing about paying late. The account was in my name, therefore, my roommates' credit history was not being affected.

I was not about to let our phone service be disconnected in hopes they would avoid this consequence in later months. I decided to reinforce the behavior of paying on time with money. The money was not from my pocket but rather the rent money from our "illegal" roommate.

To reduce our rent payments we housed an extra person without our landlord's permission. Every month our "extra" roommate, Jen, gave me her rent check that I cashed and divided among the other roommates. Because our rent is due on the 15th of each month, and our phone bill is due no later than the 20th, I decided to make receiving the rent reimbursement contingent upon prompt payment of the bill. If a check was missing I withheld that person's portion of Jen's contribution.

This operation has been effective because my roommates rely on Jen's money in their budget. Like most college students, living from paycheck to paycheck, a return on each month's rent is very reinforcing. The two girls who share a room save \$80 monthly. Making the rent return contingent upon timely payment has controlled their behavior.

Unfortunately, the procedure has created resentment. My roommates say I am acting unfairly. But the arrangement has solved the credit problem, and has relieved much of my frustration.