

TRAINING PREDELINQUENT YOUTHS AND THEIR PARENTS TO NEGOTIATE CONFLICT SITUATIONS¹

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In response to parental requests for assistance in dealing with adolescent problem children, three parent-child pairs were taught negotiation responses to hypothetical conflict situations using behavior rehearsal and social reinforcement. The negotiation process was separated into component behaviors that were practised during simulations by each youth and his parent under the direction of trainers. Results indicated that (a) the procedures were successful in training youths and their parents in negotiation behaviors that produced agreements to conflict situations, and (b) these behaviors generalized to actual conflict situations in subjects' homes.

One problem contributing to the delinquency of many youths is their behavior in conflict situations with authority figures such as parents and teachers. Conflict situations are interpersonal situations in which the youth and authority figure have opposing desires; *e.g.*, the youth wants to spend summer job money on a bike, but his mother wants him to spend it on clothes.

Many youths make inappropriate responses to conflict situations (such as fighting, withdrawing, tantrums, or destructive behavior) that ultimately bring them into contact with courts, clinics, and other agencies. In many of these situations, negotiation is a possible response that is likely to produce more acceptable consequences for both parties. Unfortunately, negotiation is a much more difficult response to execute, but its benefits warrant investigation of procedures to train this behavior.

Previous work in this area may be classified into two general approaches, (a) arbitration or mediation of specific conflicts and (b) modification of communication processes. Behavior contracting is the most prevalent example of the arbitration approach. This procedure has been described in detail elsewhere (Patterson, Cobb, and Ray, 1972; Stuart, 1971) and involves the therapist in the role of a mediator or arbitrator who facilitates mutual agreements between opposing parties about reciprocal exchanges of specific behaviors, reinforcers, and punishers. This approach has been successfully used with marital (Stuart, 1969) and parent-youth conflicts (Stuart, 1971).

The work of Bach and Wyden (1968) and Carter and Thomas (1973) exemplifies the second approach. While not aimed specifically at the negotiation process, these procedures were designed to modify problem behaviors that are relevant to negotiation (*e.g.*, abusive criticism, failure to express opinions, complaining, *etc.*). Verbal instructions, practice, and feedback are the major techniques used to modify communication processes. Much less experimental evidence exists on this approach.

The procedures described in this paper were also attempts to modify communication processes, but differed in two respects. First, the emphasis was entirely on learning new adaptive

¹Based on a thesis submitted by the first author to the Department of Human Development, University of Kansas, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. degree. This research was supported in part by Grant #MH 20030 from the National Institute of Mental Health (Center for Studies of Crime and Delinquency) to the Bureau of Child Research and the Department of Human Development, University of Kansas. We wish to thank Cynthia Gladics for her very capable work as primary observer. Reprints may be obtained from Robert E. Kifer, Department of Human Development, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Ks. 66045.

behaviors, rather than eliminating problem behaviors. Second, these techniques were primarily educational, rather than therapeutic. The training was designed to teach one specific skill, and was not a comprehensive treatment package. The procedures involved analyzing the negotiation process into component behaviors and using instructions, practice, and feedback to train these behaviors. The goal of the training was to enable clients to resolve their own conflicts without outside intervention.

The purpose of this experiment was to determine (a) if negotiation skills could be simultaneously taught to youths and their parents, and, if so, (b) the effect of these skills on mutually agreeable solutions to conflict situations, and (c) the extent to which these skills would generalize to discussions of real conflict situations at home.

METHOD

Subjects

Two mother-daughter pairs and one father-son pair served as subjects. The youths (aged 13, 16, and 17) had at least one contact with the County Juvenile Court. The boy and one girl were in Achievement Place homes. (Phillips, 1968), and the other girl was a candidate for Achievement Place. Only one parent was involved in each case because two of the youths were living with only that parent and the father of one of the girls declined to participate. All subjects were volunteers for this project and freely signed informed consent forms.

Setting

All training procedures were conducted in a small (12 by 15 ft—3.6 by 4.5 m) windowless classroom containing table and chairs, videotape recording equipment, and a cassette tape recorder.

Procedures

Overview. Each parent-child pair experienced three main phases of this study. The first was

a *home observation* conducted one week before classroom sessions and consisted of collecting sample data regarding each subject pair's behavior in discussing actual conflict situations in their home. The second phase consisted of *classroom sessions*. The third phase was another *home observation* to measure generalization of trained behaviors into the home. The first two authors functioned as trainers and made all experimental contacts with subjects.

Home observations. Trainers visited subjects' homes and asked them to identify "the three most troublesome problem situations between the two of you at this time". Any conflict situations identified by both parent and youth were discussed. In case different situations were identified, at least one selected by the parent and one by the child were discussed.

Subjects were instructed to discuss each situation for 5 min without help from trainers and were told to "try to reach a solution acceptable to both of you". At the end of the first discussion, trainers gave brief general praise for discussing the situation, restated the next conflict situation, and repeated the instructions.

Classroom sessions. Each parent-child pair attended their own weekly session. The same three-step format was used in all sessions: (a) pre-session simulation, (b) discussion and practice simulations, and (c) post-session simulation.

1. *A pre-session simulation* was conducted as soon as subjects arrived. Trainers described a hypothetical parent-child conflict situation and instructed them to role play that situation to the best of their ability. No other instructions were given. This and all other simulations were stopped by trainers after 5 min unless subjects indicated they were finished before that time.

2. *Discussion and practice* followed a standard procedure known as the Situations—Options—Consequences—Simulation (S.O.C.S.) model originated by Roosa (*unpublished*). After the pre-session simulation, trainers passed out copies of a sheet (see Figure 1 for an example) containing a description of the same situation that subjects had just simulated, a list of response options,

and a list of consequences. First, this situation was read again by trainers. Then, trainers and subjects took turns matching each option with its probable consequences. Additional options and consequences were added if they occurred to anyone. After all options were related to their probable consequences, the parent and the child selected the consequences that were most desirable to them. By noting which options led to desired consequences, subjects selected the best response to the situation. Finally, practice simulations were conducted in which each subject practised their selected option. Typically, the child played the role of the youth for the first few times; then subjects switched roles. The trainers rarely took part in these practice simulations. They functioned like directors of a film, providing instructions before simulations, quietly observing simulations, signalling the beginning and end of simulations, and providing feedback.

3. Finally, a *postsession simulation* was con-

ducted exactly like the pre-session simulation.

The same pool of hypothetical situations was used for each parent-child pair, but situations were counterbalanced across pairs. Negotiation was a possible option in all situations. Subjects were encouraged to use their own real-problem situations, but these were never volunteered except by the father-son pair during their last two classroom sessions.

All simulations were videotaped unless subjects preferred not to use the equipment that day. Videotapes were not replayed after each simulation because of the extra time involved. Replays were made only to check the occurrence of a behavior if there was any doubt, or to show subjects an especially good performance.

Behavior definitions. Two response classes were measured: negotiation behaviors and agreements. Negotiation was separated into three component behaviors: Complete Communication, Identification of Issues, and Suggestion of Options.

1. Complete Communication: statements that indicate one's position (what one thinks or wants) regarding the situation being discussed and that are followed in the same verbalization by a request for the other person to state his position or respond to the position just expressed. Examples: (a) "I want to spend my summer job money on a bike. Is that O.K. with you?" (b) "I want you to run for Student Council. What do you think about it?"

2. Identification of Issues: statements that explicitly identify the point of conflict in the situation. This statement may contrast the two opposing positions, or try to clarify what the other's position is if this is unclear, or identify what one thinks the conflict is really about. Examples: (a) "You want me to buy clothes, but I want to buy a bike." (b) "The real issue is that I want you to learn responsibility." Subjects were encouraged but not required to use the word "issue" when performing this behavior to make its occurrence more explicit.

3. Suggestion of Options: statements that suggest a course of action to resolve the conflict, but

Situation

You have worked all summer for money and your mother insists that you spend it on clothes, but you want to spend it on something else.

Options

1. Tell her it is your money and it is none of her business what you spend it on.
2. Spend it on ugly clothes you know she hates.
3. Since she will not let you spend it the way you want, give it to charity.
4. Do not spend it on anything; put it in savings and let it collect interest.
5. Spend some on clothes she wants you to get and some on what you want.
6. You buy clothes if she will buy what else you want.
7. Sell them to a friend after you buy them.
8. It is easier to buy the clothes than hassle with mother.

Consequences

1. Get her mad at you and maybe have money taken away.
2. You have to wear the clothes you bought.
3. Feel good in helping a worthy cause.
4. End up with more money than you originally had.
5. Find out the clothes were a good thing.
6. Be miserable about the whole thing.
7. Never learn how to negotiate.

Fig. 1. Sample sheet used in classroom sessions.

not merely restatements of that person's original position. Examples: (a) "How about if I spend some on clothes and use the rest to buy a bike if you'll help pay for it?" (b) "I could get a part-time job and learn responsibility that way." Subjects were encouraged but not required to pose options in the form of questions to increase the likelihood of receiving an answer to the option.

Agreements, the end result of negotiation, were recorded as one of two types: Compliant or Negotiated.

1. **Compliant Agreements:** agreements by one person to the original position of the other. Example: "All right, I'll spend all my money on clothes."

2. **Negotiated Agreements:** agreements to a suggested option that is not merely the original position of either person. Such agreements can take the form of a compromise, a deal (A gets his way but must in turn do something for B), or a new alternative (a different course of action). Example: "O.K., I guess a job would be fine." Agreements need not restate the course of action agreed upon. This was done in the examples to preserve the identity of situations.

Training procedures. Instructions, practice, and feedback were used to train subjects to use all three negotiation behaviors in practice simulations. Instructions consisted of telling the subject to perform all three behaviors; *e.g.*, "Use Complete Communication, remember to Identify the Issue, and then Suggest some Options". Practice involved each subject rehearsing all three negotiation behaviors in practice simulations. Feedback consisted of social reinforcement such as praise, smiles, and head nods. Instructions were given before practice simulations, nonverbal feedback such as smiles and head nods were given during these simulations, and verbal praise occurred after these role plays.

First one subject was instructed, then practised these behaviors until he performed all three in the same simulation. Then, the other subject went through the same procedure. Subjects were taught to use the negotiation behav-

iors in the order in which they were defined. A typical sequence occurred as follows. First, trainers instructed the youth before his first practice simulation to use all three negotiation behaviors. Then, trainers signalled subjects to begin the simulation and smiled or nodded approval after any negotiation behavior used by the youth. Usually, the youth did not use all three behaviors in the first attempt, so he was praised for those behaviors he did use and reminded to use the behaviors he did not use. Next, the youth was instructed to use all three behaviors and the second practice simulation was started. This sequence occurred until the youth performed all three negotiation behaviors in the same practice simulation. At that point, subjects switched roles and the parent went through the same sequence. After the parent met the criterion of all three behaviors in the same simulation, that session was ended and the postsession simulation was conducted.

During the first training session, the three behaviors were chained together in the following manner. After the Situation—Options—Consequences discussion, the behavior definition of the first behavior was read and a rationale given for its use. Next, trainers modelled that behavior in the context of that day's situation. Then, subjects participated in practice simulations until each had used the behavior. This procedure was repeated, adding the second, and finally the third behavior, until each subject had used all three behaviors in the same simulation.

Experimental conditions and design. A multiple baseline design across subject pairs was used to evaluate the effects of the training procedures on (a) the occurrence of negotiation behaviors, and (b) number and type of agreements reached. Baseline data on these behaviors were taken on each subject pair. Training procedures were then begun with one pair while the other two pairs remained in baseline conditions. Then, the second subject pair entered training while the first pair remained in training and the third remained in baseline conditions. Finally, the training procedures were applied to

the third subject pair. The two experimental conditions are described below.

1. *Baseline.* During baseline sessions, no instructions or praise were given for negotiation behaviors. Subjects were given minimal and general instructions before simulations. They were told to remain on the topic under discussion, use a pleasant tone of voice, or look each other in the eye, according to their particular interaction pattern. General praise (*e.g.*, "Good job"), and praise for general instruction-following were given after simulations. Baseline sessions typically lasted 45 min.

2. *Training.* The only difference between Baseline and Training sessions was the addition of instructions and praise for the negotiation behaviors. Praise for these behaviors was given after pre- and postsession simulations. Instructions and praise were used for practice simulations as previously described. Training sessions typically lasted 75 min due to a greater number of practice simulations.

During all classroom sessions, subjects were never instructed to reach agreements and were inadvertently praised for doing so only three times. Agreements were not trained in order to determine what effect the negotiation behaviors had on this desired goal behavior.

Training was terminated after two consecutive pre-session simulations in which subjects used all three negotiation behaviors between the two of them; *e.g.*, the parent could use two of the behaviors and the youth could use the third. Subjects were informed of this termination criterion at the time indicated by the arrow in Figure 2.

Measurement technique and observer agreement. All classroom sessions and home observations were recorded with a small cassette recorder operated by trainers and visible to subjects. These tapes were listened to by an observer in her home on another recorder. The observer recorded occurrences of instructions, negotiation behaviors, agreements, and praise.

Observer agreement was checked at least once in each classroom condition and home observa-

tion for each parent-child pair (a total of 12 checks were made). These checks consisted of another observer listening to the tape and recording data in the same way. Observers' records were compared point by point across all simulations in that session. Instances in which (a) both observers recorded occurrence or (b) both recorded nonoccurrence of each behavior were counted as agreements. Any other combination was counted as a disagreement. Overall reliability was computed for each behavior with the following formula.

$$\text{Per cent Reliability} = \frac{\text{No. of cells of agreement}}{\text{total number of cells}} \times 100$$

Observer agreement averaged over 85% for all behaviors. Table 1 summarizes these data.

Table 1
Summary of Reliability Data

<i>Behavior</i>	<i>Reliability</i>	
	<i>Range</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Complete Communication	50-100%	89.5%
Identification of Issues	67-100%	91.6%
Suggestion of Options	67-100%	85.3%
Compliant Agreements	87-100%	95.7%
Negotiated Agreements	77-100%	90.3%
Instructions	73-100%	89.8%
Praise	85-100%	95.9%

RESULTS

Figure 2 shows the per cent of the three component negotiation behaviors emitted during the pre- and postsession classroom simulations by the three parent-child pairs. Solid bars represent pre-session simulations. Striped bars represent postsession simulations. The letter "C" above a bar indicates that a Compliant Agreement was reached in that simulation. The letter "N" designates a Negotiated Agreement. Absence of any letter indicates no agreement was reached in that simulation. The arrows indicate when subjects were informed of the termination of training criterion.

Under training conditions, all three subject pairs substantially increased their use of the ne-

CLASSROOM DATA

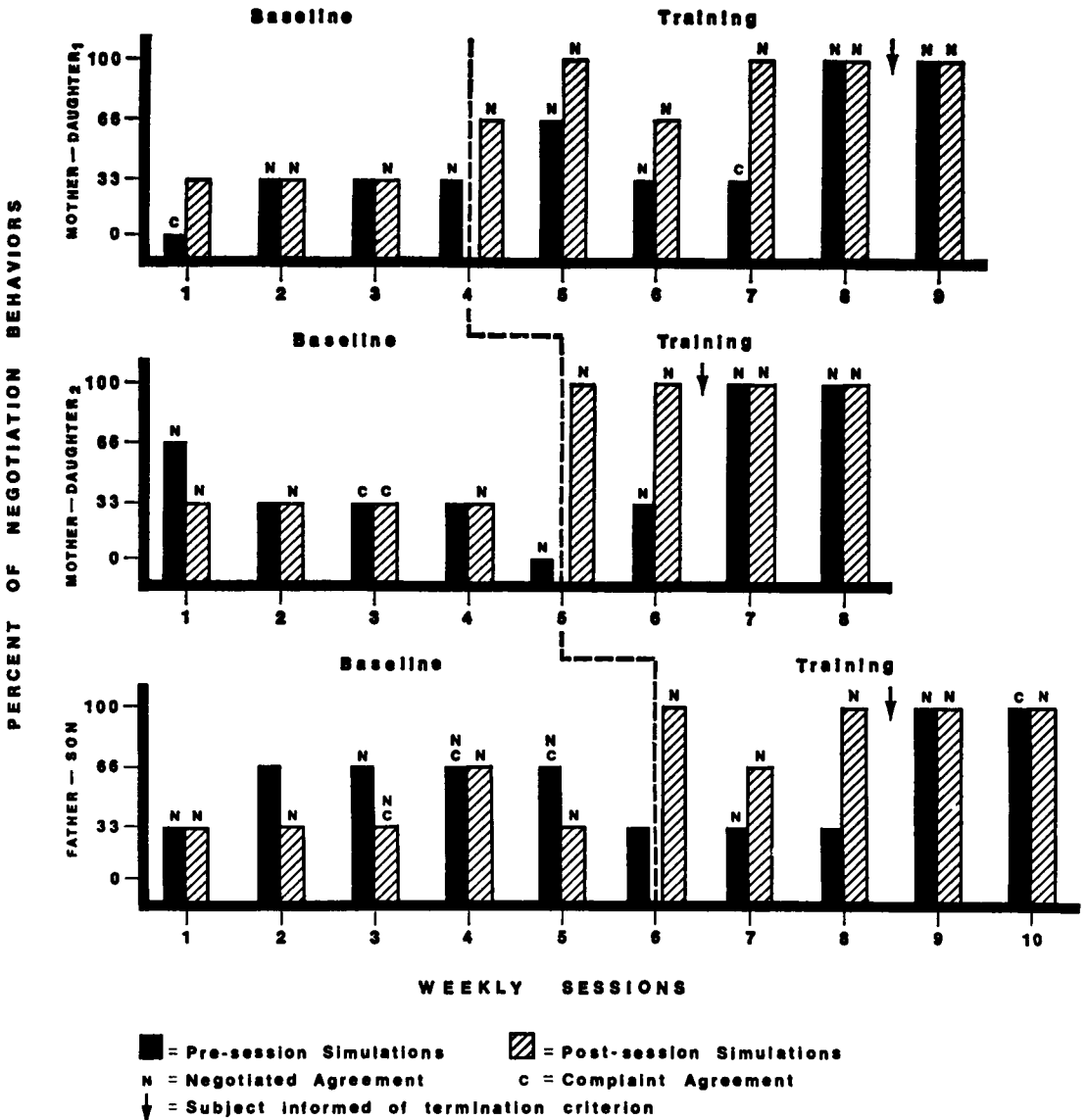


Fig. 2. Per cent of negotiation behaviors emitted by each parent-child pair during pre- and postsession classroom simulations.

negotiation behaviors over baseline levels in post-session simulations. However, only the first mother-daughter pair showed a similar increase in pre-session simulations before being informed of the criterion for termination. After learning of this criterion, both pairs promptly improved their pre-session performance to the required level.

The father-son pair reached both types of agreements in the pre-session simulations of Sessions 4 and 5, and in the post-session simulation of Session 3. They first reached a Negotiated Agreement, but continued to discuss the situation until the son complied with his father's original position. The end result was a Compliant Agreement. For all subject pairs, a

slightly greater percentage of training condition pre- and postsession simulations ended in Negotiated Agreements as compared with baseline.

Figure 3 presents data from home observations before and after training. Each data point represents the per cent of the three component negotiation behaviors used during discussion of each real-conflict situation in subjects' homes. Agreements are indicated as in Figure 2. Except for Situations 2 and 5 of the second mother-daughter pair, all situations discussed after training were different than those used before training.

Posttraining home observations of all three subject pairs showed substantial increases over pretraining observations in both performance

of negotiation behaviors and agreements reached.

After an appropriate time period determined by the nature of the agreements, each parent-child pair was contacted and asked if agreements reached during home observations had been kept. Only one of the nine situations discussed in pretraining observations ended in any kind of agreement, and this agreement was reportedly kept. Eight of the nine situations discussed after training resulted in agreements, and five of these were reportedly kept.

DISCUSSION

The training procedures produced substantial increases in negotiation behaviors during postsession simulations. However, it seemed that pre-session simulations constituted a more appropriate test of the degree to which subjects had learned these behaviors, because pre-session performance involved using the behaviors in a new conflict situation after one week had elapsed after the previous training session. Pre-session simulations were tests of generalization to a new conflict situation in the same setting. Generalization to new conflict situations did not occur with two subject pairs until after they were informed of the termination criterion. This criterion seemed to be responsible for improvements in pre-session simulations for these two subject pairs.

The trained negotiation behaviors generalized to discussions of actual conflict situations without instructions or any other contingency placed on their occurrence by trainers. More importantly, each parent-child pair reached agreement in more of these real conflict situations after training than before. Lack of an untreated control group prevents the conclusion that these improvements were due to the training procedures, although classroom data support this conclusion. These improvements could also have been due to the use of different conflict situations, but use of the same situations seemed inappropriate. It seemed more important for subjects to resolve current conflicts than to "settle"

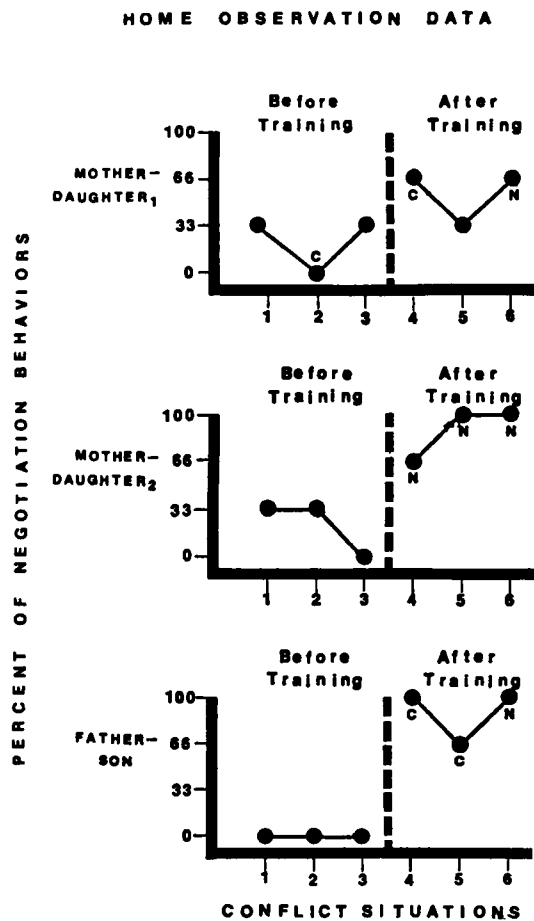


Fig. 3. Per cent of negotiation behaviors emitted by each parent-child pair during home observation discussions of actual conflict situations.

past issues that no longer presented problems. It is clear that generalization to actual conflicts can occur without using real situations in classroom training sessions.

Classroom data demonstrate, and home observation data support the conclusion, that use of these negotiation behaviors leads to agreement in a greater percentage of discussions of conflict situations. To this extent, the behaviors had their desired function. Other behaviors that enhance the negotiation process can and should be identified in future research.

Although subjects sometimes appeared angry or emotional during home observation discussions, these discussions always occurred after the situations had already emerged as problems. Probably many of the unfortunate consequences of inappropriate discussion of conflict situations occur in the "heat of battle" when the situations first become conflictual. It is likely that these negotiation behaviors would be even more difficult to emit during states of extreme emotional upset, which may accompany the onset of serious conflict situations. This issue was not attended to in this study because the procedures were designed for people who already had their emotional behavior under reasonable control. Future work in this area should attend to this issue. Several strategies for dealing with this problem have been suggested. Ferster, Nurenberger, and Levitt (1962) suggested a strategy of gaining control over the temporal occurrence of a behavior before attempting other modification procedures. Bach and Wyden (1968) discussed some interesting ideas for regulating the time and place of fights. For example, a particular time and place could be set aside for discussing conflicts which arose during the day. The self-government system at Achievement Place (Fixsen, Phillips, and Wolf, 1973) incorporates such a procedure. Youths are expected to comply with disagreeable requests when they occur, but are encouraged to discuss and negotiate their grievances at a daily meeting.

The present study provides encouraging evidence that relatively inexpensive procedures can

be developed that change parent-child interaction during conflict situations from disagreement to negotiation and agreement. The procedures required from 9 to 10 hr per subject pair. Future research should (a) investigate procedures that train these and other aspects of negotiation in less time, (b) evaluate effects of these procedures on other specified problem behaviors, (c) develop ways of reducing the aversive effects of emotional responses on negotiation, and (d) use long-term follow-up data collection to measure durability of effects.

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Received 23 October 1973.

(Revision requested 17 January 1974.)

(Final acceptance 25 April 1974.)