

Association of



*Professional
Behavior Analysts*

Disclaimer: *The following article was written as a service to the membership of APBA. Its purpose is to inform members about a variety of important events in the field of behavior analysis that have occurred over the past year, taking the opportunity to put those events in historical context. The article represents the views of the author and not necessarily those of the APBA Board of Directors or the members of APBA.*

What is happening to our field?

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I am not the only person asking this question these days. Even behavior analysts who do not usually pay much attention to the field's organizational issues and politics are beginning to wonder. In just the last year, the following events have occurred.

- A special presentation was held outside of the 2010 Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI) convention in which representatives of three state organizations discussed problems resulting from ABAI's involvement in their public policy initiatives.
- Representatives of the field's experimental interests complained in a letter to the ABAI Executive Council (EC) about excessive attention to practitioner interests by ABAI.
- The ABAI EC announced that henceforth ABAI would focus on core concerns related to the scientific and scholarly basis of the field. ABAI also withdrew from a two-year negotiation with the Behavior Analyst Certification Board, Inc. (BACB) attempting to resolve differences in their model licensing acts.

- An invited panel discussion referring to “a hostile takeover” by the BACB was scheduled for the 2011 ABAI convention, although its title and participants were subsequently revised.
- The president of ABAI resigned in open protest of ABAI governance problems.
- A member of the ABAI Practice Board circulated a letter in response to that resignation accusing the BACB of being interested primarily in making money and trying to take over ABAI.

These events follow the rapid growth of practice and the credentialing movement in the field over the last decade, not to mention the more recent formation of the Association of Professional Behavior Analysts (APBA), and ABAI’s subsequent formation of science and practice boards.

In an address at an ABA convention many years ago, B. F. Skinner referred to our field with the Shakespearian phrase, “We happy few...”, and we did seem happy then. Now, not so much. What has happened to our field that there seems to be such disagreement and enmity among colleagues who otherwise have every reason to be a close-knit community? In spite of the fact that we share a focus on behavior, respect for our scientific literature, powerful experimental methods and behavior change procedures, and a unique conceptual framework, we seem to be coming apart at the seams.

In the beginning

In order to understand recent events, it may help to consider some aspects of our field’s history that may have forecast the challenges we now face. This brief recitation is certainly not comprehensive, but I think you will see why a bit of history is an important part of this narrative. Only a dwindling number of us can say we have been witnesses to our field’s evolution for the past 40 years or more, which is why we cannot take for granted that younger colleagues can easily put today’s events in a broader context.

At first, behavior analysts were just excited to be discovering things each day and were scrambling for their toehold in academia. Even then, investigators knew these early years were a golden era of behavior analytic research. You could hardly run a study that failed to find something useful we did not know. Before too long, behavior analysts found their place in psychology departments. Psychology was often not a great fit, however, and many academic behavior analysts would admit they were never entirely comfortable there. Their departmental colleagues were often equally unenthusiastic about their presence.

Meanwhile, some researchers left the laboratory, only to discover that people wanted them to spend more time solving real problems than doing applied science. This demand for delivery of services was exciting, and many enthusiastically accepted the challenge, even though we were not really ready. Before we knew it, there were signs of an emerging applied specialty in behavior

analysis. At this early stage (way back in the 1960s, give or take), the phrase “applied behavior analysis” (ABA) still referred to a research enterprise, however, not to practice.

During this period, basic and applied researchers were cut from the same cloth. They had the same backgrounds in research training and spoke the same language. This gradually, though inevitably, changed. The applied part of the field, able to stand on the shoulders of its sibling the experimental analysis of behavior (EAB), made rapid progress in addressing a wide range of behavioral problems. It developed a distinct literature and added to the field’s technical language. We can now see that these early advances were sometimes clumsy and weak, but the ABA literature gradually improved.

Behavior analysis grew and matured throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The basic literature revealed an increasingly coherent and powerful understanding of how behavior works, and the applied literature generated an increasingly sophisticated technology. Those growing literatures gradually became more than normal mortals could master, which meant that most behavior analysts were no longer fully informed about what was happening on the other side of the fence. It was not unheard of for basic researchers to insist that those on the applied side should master EAB or, failing to do so, accept second-class status. At the same time, ABA researchers complained that their EAB colleagues failed to understand, appreciate, and build on advances in applied research. Many of us worried about this developing fracture, but there was no consensus about how to deal with it.

Perhaps the most important event during this period was the formation of a national organization in 1974 -- the Association for Behavior Analysis -- that could serve as a home for all facets of our young field. Early conventions had a family atmosphere, complete with a banquet at which the two Freds (Skinner and Keller) often entertained. Whatever the growing divisions, at least we all got together once a year for a homecoming party of sorts.

Meanwhile, the field continued to change, though the motive forces often came from outside. There were signs that taking over psychology was not going to work. Behavior analytic faculty often struggled to defend their interests in psychology departments, and there was sometimes more ebb than flow in the status of behavior analysis training in academia. The rise of neuroscience provided increasing opportunities in other departments, and growing diversity and specialization within behavioral science began to attract those with EAB interests to other meetings.

On the other side of the house, even as ABA research continued to grow, demands for delivery of practical services grew even faster. An increasing number of applied behavior analysts chose to work in service settings without a research agenda. This practitioner interest was reflected in an emerging credentialing movement. It started with the development of a state-run certification program in Florida in 1984. This program, which offered both a

bachelor's- and a master's-level credential, grew fairly rapidly. A number of other states soon wanted in on the action and made arrangements with Florida to use its examination as part of their own state certification programs, although the limitations of this system were clear to Florida's Department of Professional Regulation.

A phase change

The publication in 1993 of a book by a parent of two children who recovered from autism with intensive ABA treatment (*Let Me Hear Your Voice* by Catherine Maurice) sparked an explosion of interest in ABA services within the energetic autism parent community. The impact of this book on ABA is hard to overstate. Seemingly overnight, the usual sources of employment for ABA practitioners were overwhelmed by a demand for autism services. Although many ABA practitioners who worked in the area of intellectual disabilities shifted to serving children with autism, there was still a serious shortage of well-trained ABA practitioners. The economic contingencies predictably led many who had little or no ABA training to promote their "expertise" in "doing ABA" with children with autism, resulting in a rapidly growing problem for the field of behavior analysis that could not be ignored. Without a way for families and employers to distinguish between real ABA professionals and poseurs, the emerging reputation of ABA was at risk.

Fortuitously, Dr. Jerry Shook, who had previously served as the Senior Behavior Analyst for the State of Florida's Behavioral Services Program Office, formed a non-profit corporation (the Behavior Analyst Certification Board, Inc.) and negotiated an agreement with the state of Florida to gradually take over their certification program and extend it to the entire country. The other states agreed to discontinue their certification programs, and in 1998 a proper national (and international) certification program was born. Many remain unaware that the requirements for conducting a high-stakes professional credentialing program are mandated by accrediting bodies that set standards based on professional testing practices and extensive case law. From the outset, the BACB sought to meet those standards. Its program was eventually accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies.

Whatever one's views about professional credentialing in ABA, it is hard to deny that the establishment of the BACB turned out to be one of the most significant events in the history of the field. Lots of students and existing ABA practitioners wanted to earn their certification, and colleges and universities were happy to serve this demand. Over the next dozen years, over 200 university training programs, many of them new, found the means to meet BACB requirements for approval of coursework and practical training, and over 9,000 practitioners have become certified so far. These newly minted professionals have had a pervasive impact on governments and the employment market. With a credential available that identified individuals who met specified minimum competencies in ABA by examination, employers began demanding the credential, and pretenders were

pushed aside. ABA practitioners, agencies, and governments began figuring out how to recognize the credential in policies, rules, and statutes. Recently, health insurance companies in many U.S. states have begun to accept the credential, which has become the primary criterion for defining what it means to be a practitioner of ABA.

It is understandable that some in the EAB community grew increasingly unhappy with these trends. Its early concerns about the breadth and depth of expertise in core areas of behavior analysis achieved by those with applied interests were now exacerbated by the BACB's focus on master's-level training for certification eligibility, not to mention the even more meager bachelor's-level certification, which was mandated by the BACB's agreement with the state of Florida. Even though the BACB periodically updated the content of training and examination standards for its credentials in accordance with the results of extensive job analyses involving input from thousands of behavior analysts, there was still shortfall to be concerned about. And although there was evidence that the many new graduate and undergraduate training programs in behavior analysis generated new faculty positions, they were often for individuals with applied rather than experimental interests, and many were not in psychology departments.

It is also understandable that some segments of the EAB community also became unhappy with the effects of a rapidly growing cadre of new certificants on ABAI's annual convention. Although ABAI membership and convention registration had been growing at a steady but moderate pace for years, the numbers began to swell noticeably as the certification program grew. ABAI's long-standing policy of accepting all submissions meant that the convention program was increasingly heavy with applied entries, many of which focused on autism and were viewed by some as weak in content. At a more personal level, as legions of young ABA professionals descended on the annual convention, the familial atmosphere of earlier meetings faded. Many EAB registrants gravitated to the Society for the Quantitative Analysis of Behavior, an ABAI Special Interest Group, which eventually developed its own meeting just prior to the ABAI convention.

Although ABAI's accommodation of growing ABA interests in its convention program may have frustrated the EAB community, the ABA community wanted far more. Adding more than a thousand new BACB certificants to the world's employment roles each year unavoidably magnified the importance of meeting the needs of those practitioners as they flooded the workplace. Those needs were far beyond the reach of an annual convention, however, involving issues of public policy, legislative action, and other ventures that lay outside of ABAI's history. Years of behind-the-scenes lobbying for ABAI to undertake those responsibilities failed to generate needed changes. In the face of growing, time-sensitive practitioner issues, in 2007 a number of individuals (including four former presidents of ABAI) formed the Association of Professional Behavior Analysts (APBA), an organization devoted to serving practitioner interests.

That step was taken reluctantly. From the outset, the founding Board of APBA explicitly encouraged ABAI to collaborate in various ways, but without success. APBA even delayed going public and soliciting members while the presidents of ABAI, BACB, and APBA jointly developed a plan that would have dissolved APBA before it went any further in favor of establishing a practice directorate within ABAI, but the ABAI EC disapproved the initiative. It was only after this rejection that APBA opened its doors for business.

Recent events

All of the foregoing is directly related to a series of important events that occurred in our field over the last two or three years. Shortly after APBA's launch, ABAI formed an internal Practice Board charged with serving practitioner needs (it also formed a Science Board). Through this mechanism, ABAI began promoting licensure of ABA professionals in preference to the international BACB certification. Although the BACB and APBA had accepted licensure as a viable alternative if founded on the BACB credentials, they emphasized the need to approach licensure with great caution in each state, lest legislative politics worsen the status quo. The BACB developed a model licensure act for behavior analysts to use if they saw an opportunity to succeed with a licensing initiative in their locale. ABAI developed its own model licensure act, however, which differed from the BACB's in a number of key ways (including, for example, the requirement that only those who had graduated from an ABAI-accredited university program would be eligible for licensure). The BACB and ABAI spent almost two years trying to negotiate a model act that both organizations could support. They got tantalizingly close, but the ABAI EC ultimately withdrew from the negotiations as the organization turned toward a scientific and scholarly focus. The outcomes of licensing efforts in the small number of U.S. states where they have been initiated have been uneven. Although a few states seem well on their way to an acceptable licensing program, the future of other efforts remains uncertain, and some initiatives have been problematic for behavior analysts.

Meanwhile, ABAI's Practice Board was active in a number of states on matters of public policy, including licensure. Those efforts, however, complicated the work of some behavior analysis organizations that were pursuing their own legislative initiatives. As a result, representatives of California, Connecticut, and Massachusetts associations organized a special event at the Alamo facility in San Antonio concurrent with the 2010 ABAI convention. Their presentations at the well-attended meeting were professional but candid, documenting the problems that ABAI's Practice Board had caused for each state's public policy efforts.

In the fall of 2010, individuals representing the EAB community sent a letter to the ABAI EC expressing their concern about the increasing influence of practitioner "guild" interests and asking that the EC affirm the organization's scientific and scholarly identity. Following its fall meeting, the ABAI EC acceded

to those concerns and announced its commitment to “core concerns related to the scientific and scholarly basis of the field,” acknowledging that practitioner issues had indeed shifted attention away from those core interests. The policy statement identified a number of planned changes, including tightening standards for evaluating convention program submissions, refocusing the Practice Board agenda to bring scholarship to practitioner issues, and revising standards for ABAI’s accreditation of graduate programs.

Most recently, the president of ABAI, Pat Friman, resigned in open protest of governance issues, focusing explicitly on the role of the Executive Director. ABAI announced his resignation without comment.

In response to Pat Friman’s resignation letter, Travis Thompson, a member of the ABAI Practice Board, wrote a widely circulated e-mail rebutting Friman’s points in which he expressed his concerns about the BACB and accused it of being “devoted to certifying as many people as possible, thereby securing increased revenue in perpetuity, and indirectly gaining control over a large portion of the policy agenda of the field of behavior analysis.”

As a result of the ensuing electronic discussion of recent events among some members of the field, a Yahoo group (BehaviorAnalysisGroup) was formed to facilitate discussion of these and other issues. Some of the documents referred to in this article have been posted on that site.

So what does all this mean?

The field of behavior analysis is changing, but then it always has been. Although it might seem that some of the influences are internal, there is a good argument that they have largely been external. For example, the emergence of a practitioner class from within the ABA research community has been a gradual and unavoidable response to the growing capability of ABA technology and burgeoning societal demands.) Ideally, the field’s national organization would have been sensitive to those changes and responded in a timely manner and in ways that made the best of opportunities for growth and improvement while addressing factors that seemed troublesome. The events of the past year, which are closely related to events of the past dozen years, suggest that ABAI has instead struggled with those challenges.

There are multiple elements within the larger field that must all be involved in resolving issues, conflicts, and factionalism. APBA looks forward to participating in any such efforts on behalf of practitioners, and invites collaboration with all other interested parties for the general good of our discipline.