

Association of



Professional  
Behavior Analysts

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### **The road not taken: An imagined, alternative history of behavior analysis**

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*I recently wrote an article for the members of the Association of Professional Behavior Analysts (APBA) that put a number of recent events of broad importance to the field in some historical context. As we consider what to make of these events and how to resolve the issues they represent, we have no choice but to work with the history we have made for ourselves. This colloquial phrasing runs roughshod over otherwise important niceties of radical behaviorism, but it suggests an interesting intellectual exercise. What if we had a do-over? What might we do differently? What alternative history could have evolved instead of the one we have? What kind of present might this alternative history have given us? Does this imagined history help us consider what we need to do now?*

#### **Let us start with what really happened...**

It is 1970 again – a heady time for behavior analysis. The basic principles established in the early days are proving a remarkably solid foundation for an increasingly penetrating analysis of the whys and wherefores. Everybody finds something interesting in each issue of *JEAB*, and its two-year-old sister, *JABA*, is coming along nicely. Most people who call themselves behavior analysts are still hanging around universities in one way or another, though an increasing number seem to be interested in how to turn the power of operant conditioning into practical behavior change procedures that will consistently move behavior in useful ways. There are still not many who make a living selling this emerging technology, which is more brute force than sophistication at this point. There is

no overarching membership organization, but its absence goes unnoticed, perhaps because the field is still pretty small and stays in touch through regional American Psychological Association (APA) conventions and special conferences and meetings.

Except that getting on the program at APA meetings is becoming more difficult. Mainstream psychology's attitude toward Skinner and his ilk has never been much more than tolerance, and it often shows. And then all of a sudden, while thumbing their collective noses at the Midwestern Psychological Association, a group of folks mostly associated with Western Michigan University form a new organization called the Midwest Association for Behavior Analysis (MABA), which holds its inaugural meeting in 1974 in Chicago. The first order of business is developing a convention format that appeals to the interests of all behavior analysts, but this is not difficult. Those interests are well integrated across the field in the early years of the organization, and there are no other meetings to compete for its attendees.

As the 1970s turn into the 1980s, a period of steady growth and development is disturbed by what becomes known as the aversives controversy. Growing concern about the use of punishing consequences with developmentally disabled populations finally bubbles to the surface. Some organizations take firm positions against the use of "aversives," and the field of behavior analysis faces a new challenge – defending its emerging technology from widespread and systematic attacks that are procedural, philosophical, and political.

**But then...**

*This is where opportunities began to go unrecognized and we must start imagining a history that could have been. Except as noted parenthetically in italics, the following events did NOT occur, although there was no reason they could not have transpired.*

The aversives controversy helps the leadership of ABA (the term Midwestern is dropped) recognize that the organization has obligations that extend beyond an annual convention. They appoint a task force charged with making recommendations about how to handle the issues associated with this controversy, and the organization eventually issues a policy statement on the right to effective treatment (*such a statement was actually promulgated*) and is well on its way toward reaching out to friendly organizations for support, establishing relationships with the groups attacking behavior analysis, and working with federal agencies to protect the interests of practitioners and consumers.

As the heat of the aversives controversy gradually fades, ABA leadership realizes that this episode highlights other changes the field might be facing. It is becoming increasingly evident that many behavior analysts are building careers as practitioners. One sign of this movement is that the state of Florida has developed a program for certifying practitioners, and a few other states are

moving in that direction (*true*). Professional credentialing is a new venture for the field, and it suggests important issues on the horizon.

### **Self study**

In order to take stock of the field's evolution, to assess its needs, and to guide future decisions, in the late 1980s the ABA Executive Council (EC) forms another task force and charges it with involving the membership in a major study of the field, including the status and needs of all its aspects and interests. (*I actually initiated such an effort as a member of the ABA EC, though it never really got off the ground.*) The organization takes advantage of emerging relationships with federal agencies to win financial support for the effort, which helps assure the interest of these agencies in its results. Members of ABA are given an opportunity to participate in the study through a survey and task force subcommittees.

This initiative takes almost two years to complete, but the result is a substantial report that for the first time fully acknowledges the growing diversity of the field. The report highlights what had until then been only a general awareness that the field is made up of increasingly distinct areas of interest. The original core interests centering on university-based research are now matched by a more vigorous applied research specialty often based in clinical settings, where services are also provided. Most notably, the report documents for the first time the extent to which many behavior analysts are practitioners working in service delivery settings.

The report also articulates the needs of academic researchers, both basic and applied, for closer relations with federal funding agencies that can facilitate favorable decisions about the direction of agency research agendas and funding. It provides recommendations regarding the annual convention, including the need to modulate the distribution of program entries across different areas of member interests. One unanticipated outcome is that the task force survey of members suggests the value of keeping members well informed about the actions of ABA leadership, and seeking their views on issues of potential importance to the association.

The task force report is a lot for the leadership of ABA to digest. It requires more than a few decisions and initiatives, but the EC approaches the task with respect for the self-study process and enthusiasm for planning ways to address the report's recommendations. Its actions include establishing semiautonomous practice and science directorates to pursue the different interests of these two groups; establishing a part-time position in Washington, DC for a behavior analyst charged with systematically building relationships with funding agencies and other groups; adjusting the convention program to enhance integration and balance different interests; inviting leaders of the new certification movement to participate in yet another task force outlining the requirements, opportunities, and risks associated with credentialing; and committing to conducting regular surveys of the membership on both general and special topics.

### **Big changes**

In hindsight, the self-study effort is timely. By the mid-1990s, although the demand for practitioners has always outstripped supply, the problem is growing much worse. The autism community discovers behavior analysis (*true*), and regular member surveys highlight the resulting problems (*but there were no surveys*). Perhaps the most significant challenge, highlighted in survey reports to the membership, is that there is no standard for distinguishing between individuals who have received meaningful training in behavior analysis and those who have not, which is a serious problem for practitioners with real training in the field and for employers wanting to hire them, not to mention the good name of behavior analysis.

With the report of the task force on credentialing in hand, the ABA EC proposes forming and funding an adjunct, free-standing nonprofit corporation to serve as a credentialing body for the field. Before asking members to vote on this important proposal, the leadership arranges for discussion of its rationale and ramifications at the annual convention and publishes in the newsletter the arguments raised in EC discussions. Although a majority votes in favor of the proposal, there are some real concerns in the basic research community. The Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) is established; it is fully independent of ABA, and it proceeds to work with the state of Florida to move that state's 15-year-old certification program to a national level. This board goes operational in 1998 and offers a contract to ABA (now ABAI, emphasizing its international reach) to manage the continuing education component of the credentialing process -- a typical relationship between a disciplinary organization and the field's credentialing body. In consideration of the concerns of the research community, the BACB publishes articles explaining the details of the credentialing process and makes sure to involve basic researchers in the job analysis process.

*(Several events in the above paragraph actually happened. The BACB was formed – though ABAI had nothing to do with that – and went operational in 1998. The BACB did attempt to contract with ABAI to handle the continuing education process, but it quickly became clear that was not going to work out and the agreement was terminated. Additionally, there were basic researchers and academic behavior analysts involved in the BACB's job analysis, and a number of articles about the BACB certification program were published.)*

Turning back to our imagined history, based on ongoing member survey data as well as Florida's experience with credentialing, it is clear to the ABAI leadership that a national and, ultimately, international credentialing program will increase the growth of the practitioner cohort and make substantial demands on the organization. It becomes apparent that practitioners are generating substantially increased income for ABAI through membership, convention and conference registration fees, and continuing education fees. Annual analysis of these data, published in the newsletter, show that practitioner-generated income more than pays for the increased services they require, and a surcharge for certificant members proves unnecessary.

In order to prevent the convention program from being swamped by the interests of practitioners, the EC continues to adjust submission rules. It is becoming an honor to be on the program, and the quality and balance of presentations is generally respected, though the program decreases in size. The growing need for continuing education in practitioner areas of interest is met in part through regional conferences offered by ABAI and state, provincial, regional, and other non-US national associations. Most locales have such organizations, as developing them is an active initiative of ABAI.

With the growing participation of newly credentialed practitioners, the association's income increases substantially. These funds are invested back into the field, partly by significantly increasing the budgets for the science and practice directorates. In addition, the contracted position in Washington, DC is proving valuable and is increased to full-time status. With this experience, and mindful of the growing needs of the field's practitioners, the EC announces that the association is moving its headquarters to Washington, DC. This step is not a surprise, however. The possibility has been discussed for some time in EC meetings, summaries of which are routinely distributed to members via the newsletter and ABAI web site. A survey of the members shows good support for the move.

### **A new century**

ABAI's move to Washington, DC in 2000 marks not just a new century, but a major step toward maturity for the field. Years of working to keep a diversifying discipline integrated, building relationships with other organizations (including APA), and accommodating the burgeoning needs of the practitioner community are paying off. The organization is becoming a solid player in helping to set the priorities of federal funding agencies that benefit both basic and applied research interests.

BACB-credentialed practitioners, now being produced at a growing rate, are increasingly respected and sought after. ABAI has made a real effort for years to address its relationship with APA, which has the resources and reach through its state organizations to threaten ABA practitioners' right to practice with restrictive licensing statutes. It is therefore an important achievement that a peace treaty of sorts is reached with APA. This accomplishment paves the way for states to license behavior analysts who have earned their BACB credential, and a cautious effort to pursue licensing statutes based on the BACB credentials begins in those few states that are ready for this step.

At the same time, the BACB takes every opportunity to raise the bar for training programs, certification task standards, and testing requirements. The earlier concerns of the basic research community are pursued by publishing articles about the requirements and mechanisms of high-stakes professional credentialing, involving basic researchers in the process of setting standards, and increasing the standards for credentialing. The BACB places additional

restrictions on the role of bachelor's level certificants and adds a doctoral-level credentialing option. (*Everything in this paragraph actually happened.*)

The BACB's program of approving college and university course sequences and practicum training drive the rapid growth of academic programs – tenfold in 10 years (*true*). This means that behavior analysis increasingly earns a place in departments that have not previously supported the field (*true*). One side effect of this growth is acceleration of the growing independence of behavior analysis in academia, a longstanding goal for many in the field (*true*). With behavior analysis no longer the captive of psychology, colleges of education and other academic departments often sponsor BACB-approved training programs (*true*). However, freestanding departments of behavior analysis are increasingly being created in colleges and universities on the strength of the demand for credentialed ABA practitioners. Aside from other benefits, this movement has the effect of increasing demand for both researchers and practitioner faculty.

### **Epilogue**

Some might feel this imagined, alternative history is too ideal. Surely everything could not have turned out so well. Others might take the position that some of the imagined events are actually far from ideal. Of course, we can only view this alternative history from the vantage point of the one we have shared. Had we lived this alternative history, we might not hold many of our present views about issues.

It could at least be argued that there is nothing about this alternative history that could not have developed. As parenthetically noted, a number of the events in this history actually occurred, although their context at the time yielded different outcomes than the alternative history portrays. Imagining a rapprochement with APA does seem pretty fanciful, but behavior analysis has always been involved with APA, and a more vigorous and integrated effort involving ABAI as a fellow organization based in Washington, DC could have, over time, led to a much better relationship than now exists.

The point of this exercise is to appreciate that we did not have to be where we are in the evolution of our field. With better decisions, we could now be in a better place. Did research and practice interests have to be in conflict? Did the certification movement have to take shape without ABAI's involvement? Was it unavoidable that APBA had to be formed to step into the breach to serve practitioners? Did ABAI governance have to evolve in the way it has? Are we not supposed to be better at managing behavior than this?

As time travel movies remind us, we cannot change a moment of our past without affecting the consequences for our present. We cannot know what our future would be had events in our field's past been different. As behavior analysts, however, we know we can intervene now and create conditions that address and resolve the problems we clearly face in a way that forecasts a better future.