A Note on the International Sameness of Behavior Analysis And Its Applications

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Introduction by
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Applied behavior analysis in Norway: As an American sees it

Professor Donald M. Baer is one of the grand old men in applied behavior analysis. He took the lawful principles of behavior that emerged from the animal research in the laboratories, and applied them in the study of human behavior and human development. Also, he applied those principles in helping people change their behavior—that is, in therapy. The principles of behavior change was found to be effective and lawful in the natural community and in ameliorating human suffering. Applied behavior analysis proved to be a powerful tool.

Professor Baer was one of the founders of the Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis (JABA) in 1968, and published an often cited article in the first issue of the journal: Baer, Wolf, & Risley: Together with professor Sidney Bijou, he edited two, now classical, books: Baer & Bijou (19): Child Development—Readings in the experimental analysis of behavior.

For decades, he has been a professor at the Department of Human Development and Family Living at the University of Kansas, Lawrence.

Professor Baer is familiar with applied behavior analysis in Norway. In 1991, he was an invited speaker at EABT in Oslo, and at the Department of psychology at the University of Oslo he lectured and discussed together with dr. Murray Sidman and dr. Charles Catania. Also, he visited Kapellveien Treatment Center and Vestre Haugen Treatment Center.

Dr. Svein Eikeseth got his doctoral degree working with Baer in Kansas. Dr. Willy-Tore Mørch visited the university of Kansas in 1990, presenting methods and results from his doctoral project on staff-training. Tor Jenssen worked in Lawrence with Baer for weeks and months over the years 1992-1995.

(On Jenssen's dissertation and disputation in 1996, Baer was originally appointed as primary opponent in the evaluation committee, but due to the slight possibility of they had cooperated closely, another committee was appointed).

We asked professor Baer for a short comment on his impression of applied behavior analysis in Norway.

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The day my class graduated from the University of Chicago, its chancellor praised our devotion to the truth. The truth deserved devotion, he said, because it was everywhere and always the same. That had allowed its continuous, progressive clarification and understanding for the past 1,000 years, and would continue to allow its further progressive clarification and understanding indefinitely into the future.

A few of us, trained in natural science, privately amended his thesis: We had not studied the truth because it was everywhere and always the same. We had been taught and had agreed to the rules of proof, and we and those like us had studied what we could by those rules. That let us define the truth as what we could prove. That in turn let us question the generality of what we could prove: Granted we had proven many facts at one time and in one place. The important question was, How many of those facts were provable at how many other times and in how many other places? Could we prove when context changed what could be proven?

We could prove that much of the truth was not everywhere and always the same; but we could also prove that some of it had considerable generality. We valued generality. So, if any facts ever proved to have perfect generality — to be everywhere and always the same — we would value them most of all. But while we could see how to prove that some facts had more and more generality, we could not see how to prove any of them had perfect generality. We have contented ourselves with a comparative rather than an absolute generality: The more generality we can prove a fact to have, the more valuable the fact. Absolute generality we will leave to chancellors who must find something inspirational to tell the graduates.

Behavior Analysis is a discipline derived from a devotion to the rules of proof that characterize the natural sciences. Those rules emphasize objective, reliable, and valid measurement; experimental design; replicability; and sampling representative of what we want to know. The result is an inductive discipline that describes how behavior works in experiments, and thereby begins to show us how to transpose those experiments into our lives -- how to manage behavior.

The principles of Behavior Analysis are only inductive summaries of many, many proofs, showing that the same facts about behavior management emerge in experiments done at many, many different times and in many, many different places.

Behavior Analysis is still practiced as a natural science. If it were a social science, or became one, it would, apparently, no longer be characterized by rules that emphasize objective, reliable, and valid measurement; experimental design; replicability; and sampling representative of what we want to know. It would instead become essentially a matter of choosing theory independent of fact, and then establishing by survey or correlation a few logically comforting facts by whatever choices of measures and sampling were necessary to keep the theory safe. Natural science kills theory when it conflicts with fact; social science kills facts when they embarrass theory -- until the theory is abandoned, as it frequently is, for other reasons.

I have seen Behavior Analysis taught and practiced in North America, Latin America, Brazil, England, Ireland, Norway, Spain, Israel, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. It was rare in all those places. Other than that, I cannot say it is everywhere and always the same; but it seems to me to be very much the same in all those places and across all the times I have seen it and read of it. The principles -- the inductive summaries -- are always the same. The sophistication of behavior analysts in devising research to affirm, extend, and question those principles is much the same, although some countries are better than others at funding that research, and funding the education that makes the research possible. When the principles of behavior are applied to the current social problems of a time and place, the probability, the targets, and the ethics are as variable as culture, politics, and current economics determine -- but if it is examined at the level of principle, the essential process of application is much the same, and, so far, the results seem much the same -- obedient to principle.

The apparent homogeneity of Behavior Analysis across the countries in which it is taught and practiced should not seem surprising. After all, if the truth is defined as what we can prove, then wherever and whenever we teach proof as the natural sciences have always done so far, a Behavior Analysis that is proof-driven will always and everywhere be much the same, in that it will always and everywhere be what can be proven.

We need not worry about the stability of Behavior Analysis; it is as stable as the universe it studies. We do need to worry about the stability of training in natural science. The proof rules of natural science have generated Behavior Analysis, and always will. But teaching the proof rules of natural science is no more stable than the behavior of universities.

Apparently Norway is unusual in teaching university students that psychology can be a natural science, or in teaching natural-science students that behavior is one of its subject matters -- or both. Norwegians can be proud. They can also remember that maintenance of the crucial behavior is always an applied problem.