

## A Note on the Historical Record: MPA and MABA

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Margaret Peterson's account of the development of the Midwestern Association of Behavior Analysis (Peterson, 1978)<sup>1</sup> was, as far as I was concerned, both interesting and accurate, and I read it with pleasure. However, there are a couple of points on which I would like to add some comments.

The first is trivial. At the meeting at which MABA was founded in 1974 on the University of Chicago campus, Indiana University was not represented by Richard Sanders. True, his name did appear on the program as coordinator for "Indiana University Happenings." But this merely illustrates one of the pitfalls of historical research—documents appearing at the time of the historical event may nevertheless contain errors. Before we perpetuate what has been perpetrated by some unknown typist, let's set the matter straight. Richard Sanders was at Southern Illinois at the time. I was the person responsible for the Indiana presentation, assisted by two of the students working with me, Gary W. Sears and Dallas E. Mulvaney.

The second issue is more serious. While it is undoubtedly true that dissatisfaction with the program of the Midwestern Psychological Association served as an important spur to the formation of MABA, I think that any suggestion that MPA treated behavior analysts in a prejudicial fashion is both unfortunate and of questionable validity. I disagreed with the idea at the time, and I disagree with it now. Although the portrayal of MPA as a bogey man may have served a useful purpose in the formative years, MABA can now stand on its own record and needs no mythology to justify its existence. I said that the representation of MPA as hostile is unfortunate: it would be a pity if people conducting research in operant conditioning and behavior modification hesitated to participate in the activities of one of our regional psychological associations on the basis of a mistaken belief that they were not welcome. I said that such a representation was of questionable validity: as a participant in the governance of MPA, first as a member of Council and now as Secretary-Treasurer and *ex officio* member of the Program Committee, I have been in a position to observe data to which Peterson simply has not had access.

As a general context for what I am about to say, I would like to point out that MPA is not and has never been a single, transcendental, monolithic entity. As Floyd Allport noted many years ago (Allport, 1933), a social institution or organization has no existence apart from the behaviors of the individuals who are involved in its activities. This is a point to which readers of Skinner's writings (e.g., 1953, pp. 297 ff.) should be receptive. MPA is a collection of individuals, and its actions are the actions of individuals.

Take, for example, the claim, frequently advanced over the years, that MPA has discriminated against our point of view in selecting papers for inclusion in its program. I would certainly grant the possibility that at some time some individual responsible for reviewing submissions either in animal learning or in the modification of human behavior has disagreed with our methodological orientation. He or she would naturally select papers by somewhat different standards. This could happen with any society or any journal that is not exclusively controlled by our point of view. But members of MPA's Program Committee are appointed only for three-year terms; when their terms are up, they are replaced by other reviewers. It is even conceivable that a succession of reviewers might be appointed that differed with us methodologically. But unless there is some peculiar malignancy residing in the atmosphere or the soil of the midwestern United States, it is difficult to see why such a circumstance should persist longer in one regional association than in another. Certainly it could not be inherent. Unlike the case with many journals, for example, scientific societies are controlled by their membership. If one point of view is underrepresented in the governing structure and consequently in the process of selecting papers for the program, it must be because that group has been relatively lax in nominating and/or supporting candidates for office.

The remedy is obvious, and over the past few years Gerald Mertens has been doing something

Footnote

<sup>1</sup>For a brief history of behavior analysis prior to the founding of MABA, cf. Dinsmoor (1973).

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about it. Furthermore, his efforts have been surprisingly successful. The number of mentions required on the nominating ballot to place a candidate on the final list is rather small, and in most cases it has been sufficient for Mertens to suggest a name in his mimeographed newsletter. Of those candidates nominated with Mertens' support, five out of nine, according to my count, have been successful. Since there are at least four candidates, often five, on the ballot for each position, this is well above the ratio of success enjoyed by the average candidate for office in MPA. The record does not suggest that the membership is prejudiced against us. All that is required is for us to put up some good candidates.

Incidentally, it is not clear that 1974 was the high point of our strength in MPA, as suggested in Peterson's article. At the 1978 meeting, for example, Council was composed of two cognitive psychologists, three social psychologists, and four behavior analysts. Not bad for a persecuted minority!

I would also like to make it clear that officers of MPA who do not identify and are not identified with our group are not necessarily hostile; often they have been demonstrably friendly to our point of view. For example, at the first meeting of Council I attended after my election in 1973, the late Stan Ratner spoke up on our behalf, conveying our complaints about our representation on the program. More recently, another officer, who has just finished a term on the Program Committee and who is currently a member of Council, suggested in print that social psychologists should pay greater attention to work "in the operant tradition" (Deaux, 1978, p. 211).

In her article, Peterson reported the humorous incident of a nameless official of MPA who cracked up Neil Kent in 1974 by his reference to a "maze psychologist." What she did not know is that a couple of months later this same official—Winfred Hill, then President of MPA—appointed the person I suggested to fill the animal learning vacancy on the Program Committee. Hill's appointee, Mark Rilling, was a former post-doc in my lab, and his name is well known to readers of the *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* and of the recent volume edited by Honig and Staddon (Rilling, 1977). Similarly, James Greeno, President of MPA for 1977-78, appointed David R. Thomas, a well-known member of Division 25 (although not, I believe, of MABA) to the position left vacant when Rilling completed his term. Greeno also, I am told, offered the developmental

opening to an individual prominent in both MABA and Division 25, but the offer was declined.

While I am on the subject of the Program Committee, I should add that during his tenure as President, Nate Azrin added a substantial number of radical behaviorists to the committee. For a time we had an outright majority sharing this point of view.

Turning to a slightly different issue, I disagree with some of Peterson's comments concerning "the decision to break with MPA," i.e., to hold meetings at a different time than MPA. I don't know quite what she meant by the statement that "MPA was unmoved by our requests for behavioral representation" (p. 7). That covers a lot of territory. Which individuals in MPA? What requests? Clearly, our viewpoint has been heavily represented in MPA's Council—we had three members of MABA's Organizational Committee (Azrin, Bijou, and Dinsmoor) on it at the time—and on its Program Committee. Mertens-inspired Open Meetings were approved by the Program Committee and listed in the Programs for 1975, 1976, and 1978 (albeit by a narrow margin on the third occasion). If too few papers appeared on the program, perhaps it was because too few were submitted. It is our job to stimulate the submission of papers in our area of interest, not that of other members of MPA. [The preceding statement is also a response to Marge's comment about "MPA's reluctance to take an active role in the development of the rapidly expanding area of operant conditioning as an important discipline within psychology" (p. 3)].

As for the requirements imposed by MPA for a joint meeting, two basic points should be made. First, although MABA's request came in shortly afterward, the immediate stimulus to the formulation of MPA's Guidelines was a request by the Midwest Peace Science Society in 1974 for a joint meeting in 1975. Second, while the guidelines seem a bit stuffy in a couple of respects, they are not, in my opinion, unreasonable. In the main, they were designed to protect MPA from drains on its personnel, hotel space, or finances by other organizations, typically smaller in size, seeking to take advantage of the congregation of a large number of psychologists at its annual meeting.

The guidelines were acceptable to the Midwest Peace Science Society, which did, in fact, hold its meeting in conjunction with MPA the following year. The main objection expressed at the 1975 meeting of MABA's Organizational Committee, as I recall, was to a provision precluding the applicant

organization from holding any sessions during the Presidential Address or the Business Meeting. The prohibition of competing activities during these two phases of the program is a long-standing rule within MPA itself, and although I was personally opposed to its extension to the case of a joint meeting, I cannot regard that extension as unreasonable.

I do not think that Peterson's comment about "complete censorship" is warranted. The only basis I can find for her complaint is a sentence that reads as follows: "It is assumed that in most cases the Program Committee will approve, pro forma, the entire proposed program, but MPA reserves the right to object to any session that seems clearly in conflict with MPA's program or is judged to be inconsistent with the purposes and standards of MPA" (Guidelines for Organizations Wanting to Meet Jointly with Midwestern Psychological Association, Inc., 1974). To ask MPA to waive a requirement of this sort would, I think, constitute an unreasonable request. In effect, it would be asking MPA to lay down no standards whatsoever for the program of an organization seeking the advantage of a joint meeting. It would be asking MPA to risk endorsing that of which it did not approve.

In any case, by 1975 the question was moot. Not only was MABA too large to meet in the same hotel with MPA but, furthermore, the majority of its Organizational Committee had no wish to do so. MABA did not even schedule its next convention to meet at the same time as MPA's. While there were a number of arguments for and against meeting at a separate time, rather than concurrently, the deciding factor, I think was that attendance at the 1975 meeting was so large that the leadership of MABA no longer felt any need to lean on MPA for support. As subsequent events have amply demonstrated, MABA was by then perfectly capable of standing on its own two feet.

I do not wish to give the impression that all has been sweetness and light. I have witnessed what I regarded as severe personality clashes, compounded by mutual suspicion, at two or three meetings of MPA's Council. But these individual interactions are not entirely relevant to what I have to say, and I do not wish to go into them. Perhaps it

will suffice to note that the officer of MPA regarded by the MABA leadership as least friendly to their aspirations did nevertheless arrange for an announcement of MABA's wholly separate 1976 meeting to appear in the MPA program booklet, in exchange for a like courtesy by MABA. I will also add that I have experienced little difficulty in getting along at a personal level with all parties. I am aware that representatives of insurgent groups are often "co-opted" by the establishment, but whether my name is Uncle Tom you will have to decide on the basis of the evidence.

Finally, I would like to take the occasion of this note to add a message for the future. However one views the relations between MPA and MABA in the past, MABA is now in the process of dropping the designation "Midwestern" and becoming a national, or indeed an international, organization. With this perspective, the two organizations are no longer regional rivals. There is no reason why MPA need be regarded as different, vis-a-vis the ABA, from any other regional psychological association. As a matter of fact, given the substantial representation of behavior analysts in its administration, MPA's meeting may be an especially appropriate one. And if ABA begins meeting outside of the Midwest, in accord with its supra-regional status, MPA may again become an especially economical meeting for those of us living in the Midwest to attend.

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