

There's a Man Goin' Round Taking Names

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Abstract This commentary addresses the two basic premises of the argument made by Dixon et al (2015) concerning quality metrics for behavior analytic graduate training programs. Taken together, these premises assert that the practice of behavior analysis will be more effective if practitioners are research savvy and that becoming research savvy is more likely to occur in a circumstance in which research is ongoing. I support both of these assumptions, the former by examining the impact of group circumstances on values, and the latter by considering the repertorial elements likely to be established under conditions of contingency shaping.

Keywords Research · Practice

I must that say I found it startling to see colleagues' names in the Dixon et al. (2015) article, and even more startling to see mine among them. That said, my plan in this commentary is to address what I see as the two basic premises of this article. The first of these premises asserts that the practice of behavior analysis will be more effective if practitioners are “research savvy” than if they are not. Abiding or failing to abide by this premise requires consideration as to what is meant by this expression. The second basic premise asserts that trainees are more likely to become research savvy when immersed in a circumstance where research is ongoing than in one where activities of this sort are absent. I will address the latter premise first.

Huddie Ledbetter song title

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The members of a graduate training program, including both students and faculty members, constitute a psychological community or, as Kantor (1981) describes it, a collectivity. The concept of a collectivity implies a conventionality of action. This is to say that persons may be regarded as members of a particular collectivity to the extent that they act with respect to stimuli in ways common to other members. These patterns of interaction are acquired under the auspices of specific group circumstances and are unique to those circumstances. As such, a collectivity in which members are engaged in research is unlike one in which they are not.

The difference between collectivities of these sorts is not limited to the absence of a particular type of activity, namely conducting research. Also entailed are attitudes toward this type of activity. Research may be highly valued, or not. It may be regarded as essential to the advancement, efficacy, and ethicality of practice, or not. It is possible that the value of research, as asserted herein, may be promoted by the mere consumption of research. However, the value of research is assured when conducting research is a commonplace within a group and not so otherwise. In short, it seems unlikely that research would be highly valued in a circumstance in which no one is engaged in this activity.

I turn now to the first premise of the Dixon et al. (2015) argument, namely that the practice of behavior analysis will be more effective if practitioners are “research savvy” than if they are not. As previously mentioned, this assertion invites consideration as to what this expression may be taken to mean. Presumably, it refers to a repertorial element—a knowing of some sort. As such, we may consider the repertorial development that might be expected to take place through engagement in research given the nature of this particular type of activity.

Research is largely a matter of problem solving. It begins with the identification of a problem to be solved, which is

itself a problem. Likewise, finding a means of solving an identified problem is a problem to be solved, as are the activities entailed in determining whether a solution has been achieved. Moreover, what might have seemed to be a solution to any one of these problems may turn out not to be so, necessitating further problem-solving activity over an even more protracted period of time. In short, conducting research is an exercise in scientific problem solving.

It is tempting to suggest that a repertorial element of scientific problem solving is possible of development by means other than actually conducting research. The argument here is that the same would be possible by merely consuming the research conducted by others. More specifically, this argument asserts that while “knowing how” to conduct research may be a valuable repertorial element for a behavior analyst to acquire, “knowing about” is a sufficient component of this repertoire to meet the needs and purposes of behavior analytic practitioners. The logic here is somewhat odd given that “knowing about” is a much more complicated repertoire than “knowing how” from Skinner’s (1974) perspective.

Even so, problem solving in the context of conducting research is not simply a matter of following established rules with respect to this enterprise; it is also the development of “personality” characteristics of a more general sort. Among them are characteristics of flexibility and persistence in the face of failure—the sorts of characteristics that accompany contingency-shaped behavior. Importantly, these are the very characteristics that practitioners need to achieve the outcomes that they are responsible for achieving. As such, it is not unreasonable to suggest that practitioners be exposed to the contingencies inherent in the process of conducting research through which these characteristics might be honed.

References

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