A Preliminary Assessment of the Qualities and Behaviors of Exemplary Behavior Analysts

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Introduction

What makes an individual an exemplary behavior analyst? Given our profession’s focus on objective definition, description, quantification, and experimentation, we should be well-prepared to answer this question. While articles concerning the factors involved in high-quality behavior analytic practitioner training programs (e.g., Ahearn, Green, Riordan, Weatherly, 2015; Critchfield, 2015; Dixon, Reed, Smith, Belsile, & Jackson, 2015) have certainly led the discussion, there is a deficit in the subsequent literature that describes the characteristics that make behavior analysts outstanding in their field.

In their work, 25 Essentials Skills and Strategies for the Professional Behavior Analyst, Bailey and Burch (2009) laid the groundwork by examining the characteristics of effective ABA consultants. However, no empirical research to-date has examined what behavior analysts believe are the characteristics and corresponding behaviors that are displayed by the field’s most exemplary practitioners. The current study was designed to provide a preliminary assessment of these characteristics and behaviors.

Method

Participants

- 338 participants were recruited from the BACB registry
- 338 participants took part in the study
- 127 participants were eliminated for not following instructions
- 211 participants were included in the study

Materials

- Demographic survey

Procedure

- After providing informed consent, participants completed a demographic questionnaire related to their education and professional practice experience
- List five qualities/characteristics deemed essential to be an exemplary behavior analyst
- No definition of exemplary was provided
- List behaviors that correspond to the characteristics they identified
- Thirteen researchers independently categorized the characteristics - resulting in 180 separate terms
- Synonyms were collapsed by the investigators, resulting in 35 characteristics and their corresponding behaviors (see the Exemplary Behavior Analyst Checklist)

Discussion

Behavior analysts (BCBAs and BCBAs-Ds) across the country were asked to identify the characteristics and corresponding behaviors of individuals they consider to be exemplary in the discipline. From these responses, a list of 35 characteristics and corresponding behaviors were compiled alphabetically into the Exemplary Behavior Analyst Checklist (EBAC). This checklist contains a number of characteristics that are traditionally representative of the field (e.g., analytical, applied, conceptually systematic, technological; Barr, Wolf, & Risley, 1968) and relate to technical and conceptual skills. Respondents also identified a number of characteristics associated with compassion and support of clients/individuals (i.e., client-centered, culturally competent, empathetic, interpersonal skills, patient, personable, positive/nurturing). These characteristics align well with recent research advocating for additional training in therapeutic relationships (Taylor, LeBlanc, & Nosik, 2018).

While informative, there are limitations to the current study. First, the sample size is limited, as there are over 20,000 BCBAs (Carr & Nosik, 2016). Additionally, the majority of participants reported working primarily in early intervention or with K-12 aged clients who have autism or other developmental disabilities. Therefore, these results may not be representative of the discipline as a whole. Future research is necessary to expand the sample size and examine data from behavior analysts practicing outside of the United States. Additional research is also necessary to examine similarities and differences between what clients and family members believe are the characteristics and corresponding behaviors of exemplary behavior analysts. These data may be beneficial in informing graduate and undergraduate training programs and for continuing education practices.

Exemplary Behavior Analyst Checklist

1. Advocate for ABA (Provides accurate information about the benefits of ABA to others, demonstrates understanding of the need for individualized treatment plans)
2. Analytical or closely related conferences; seeks feedback from trusted colleagues/mentors; stays current on local bills/laws/insurance issues; attends and/or presents at behavior analytic or closely related conferences
3. Bookkeeping and record-keeping system that aligns with ethical, legal, and organizational standards is maintained, updated, and continuously improved
4. Budget planning and management (Provides high-quality programming to improve public policy, small-budget operations to improve public policy)
5. Business and administrative management (Spends significant time speaking with client/caregivers to determine goals and needs; works with other professionals to improve public policy)
6. Conveys empathy (Communicates frequently and effectively with colleagues from different disciplines)
7. Corrects misconceptions (Corrects misconceptions about the role of behavior analysts)
8. Corrects misunderstandings (Corrects misunderstandings about the role of behavior analysts)
9. Culturally competent (Speaks with local/national media)
10. Culturally competent (Speaks with local/national media)
11. Culturally competent (Speaks with local/national media)
12. Culturally competent (Speaks with local/national media)
13. Culturally competent (Speaks with local/national media)
14. Directs attention to children’s needs to ensure a well-balanced program (Directs attention to children’s needs to ensure a well-balanced program)
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References