Behaviorism: An essential survival tool for practitioners in autism

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What we’re going to do today
1. Review the role of radical behaviorism (RB)
2. Consider why you need to know this stuff
3. List topics ABA practitioners need to know
4. Overcome barriers to understanding RB
5. Learn about some key positions of RB
What we’re going to do today

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2. Consider why you need to know this stuff
3. List topics ABA practitioners need to know
4. Overcome about barriers to understanding RB
5. Learn about some key positions of RB
6. Start you down the path

What we’re not going to do today

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What we’re not going to do today

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2. Teach you enough about any of them

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3. Convince you to buy into all features of radical behaviorism
4. Weave it all together into a coherent perspective
5. Provide a substitute for studying this on your own
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5. Provide a substitute for studying this on your own
6. Answer all your questions

How we’re going to do this

1. I’ll talk a lot
2. While I’m talking, you think real hard
3. When you don’t get it, ask a question
4. Raise your hand so I can see, but just ask
How we’re going to do this
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4. Raise your hand so I can see, but just ask
5. (Remind me to repeat the question)
6. There is no limit on questions
7. Somebody else also wants to know

Things to talk about
1. Not understanding what I’m trying to get across
Things to talk about

1. Not understanding what I’m trying to get across
2. Not buying what I’m selling
3. Wanting to know why a criticized idea is bad
4. Wanting to know where a position leads
5. Wanting to know why a position is important
6. Wanting to understand how a position relates to practice
7. Wanting to know when we’re going to take a break
Questions?

OK. I’ve got one for you...

What training do you have on radical behaviorism and related conceptual issues?

1. Full graduate course solely on this topic
2. Partially covered in a graduate course
3. Occasionally touched on in graduate courses
4. Mainly through conference presentations
5. Only through reading on my own
6. Not any, really, but I'm ready to learn!

What does it mean to be a behavior analyst?

Focus on behavior

Established scientific literature

Methods suited to operant behavior
Conceptual framework

Focus on behavior
Established scientific literature
Methods suited to operant behavior
Conceptual framework

Why do practitioners need to understand conceptual issues?

Interface

Reinterpret everyday language
Avoid pitfalls of mentalism

Maintain consistency with science

Avoid backsliding

Not really an option

Task standards...

Content Area 2: Definition and characteristics
 Explain and behave in accordance with the philosophical assumptions of behavior analysis...

Distinguish between mentalistic and environmental explanations of behavior...

Describe and explain behavior, including private events, in behavior analytic (non-mentalistic) terms...

Not just about rules
It's about…
What we choose as target behavior
How we define and measure it
How we evaluate its functions
How we decide on intervention objectives
How we interpret results
How we communicate with others

Acquisition
Goal: Enjoying selected activity
Target: Trying to learn
Reinforce: Making a good effort
Measure: Number of tries
Interpret: Encouraging learner’s interest

Reduction
Goal: Teach to handle not getting his way
Target: Acting out
Assessment: Due to frustration
Con sequate: Explain desired behavior; redirect to desired activity
Measure: Number of episodes
Interpret: Learned how to handle frustration

Mentalism in practice
Accommodates vernacular implications of behavior
Encourages focus on non-behavioral targets
Leads to assessment in terms of mental “events”
Tempts misdirected measurement & intervention procedures
Prompts attribution of change to mental causes

So what does a practitioner need to know?

Not just a vocabulary…
But a new dialect

Are we free to choose?

It's just verbal behavior…

And it's all learned

So…

Response classes?
Meaning?
Grammar?
Using words?
Reference?
Speaker as listener?

And what about opinions, convictions, and beliefs?
Is making up your mind like making up your bed?

What to do about mentalism?

What’s really inside?

What about thinking?

And emotions and feelings?

Learning to respond to private events
Traits, attitudes, moods, and all that other stuff

How do you learn to talk about yourself?

Who do you think you are?

Perception, awareness, and consciousness

The behavior of sensing

Seeing that you are seeing
Self control

And...
Knowing, problem solving and reasoning
Creativity, credit, and blame
Culture and behavior analysis
And just a little bit of history

Yes, ABA practitioners should know all of this stuff

Now let’s get started...

(by cutting off avenues of intellectual escape in order to prepare you to fully consider everything else)

1. Two competing assumptions about the origin of behavior
2. Nature of verbal behavior

Free will vs. Determinism

Free will: the notion that our ability to control our behavior is entirely our own and is at least in part not susceptible to other influences
Free will vs. Determinism

Free will: the notion that our ability to control our behavior is entirely our own and is at least in part not susceptible to other influences

Determinism: the notion that our behavior is fully controlled by hereditary and environmental factors

* Raised with a bit of both
* Mental activity preceding behavior
* Inside vs. outside implication
* Notion of choice integral to free will view
* Admit environmental influences but hold out for free choice too
Free will vs. Determinism

Implications of free will position
* Can control our own behavior
* Can make free choices
* Not controlled by hereditary/environmental
* Capricious, random, without explanation
* Researchers cannot identify causes
* Practitioners cannot control behavior
* Accommodates mentalism

Free will vs. Determinism

Implications of determinism position
* No exceptions
* Respected view in science; behavior is a physical event
* Position doesn’t require identification of all causal variables
* Loss of idea of free choice
* Loss of idea of autonomy – helpless, passive

Free will vs. Determinism

Only an assumption
* Cannot prove either way
* Proving free will requires showing behavior can occur without hereditary/environmental factors
* Proving determinism requires showing physical causes of any behavior
* Consequences for practitioners of assuming one
  or the other?

Free will vs. Determinism

A few related issues
* Non-physical causation

Free will vs. Determinism

A few related issues
* Non-physical causation
* Responsibility
Free will vs. Determinism

A few related issues
* Non-physical causation
* Responsibility
* Choice

Free will vs. Determinism

So, where are you on this?

Free will vs. Determinism

Yes, your assumption is itself determined!

The nature of verbal behavior

Do you agree…
1. Everything we say, think, or write is learned.
2. All verbal behavior comes from the same kind of environmental experiences.
3. Verbal behavior is not fundamentally different than other behavior.

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Do you agree...

1. Everything we say, think, or write is learned.
2. All verbal behavior comes from the same kind of environmental experiences.
3. Verbal behavior is not fundamentally different than other behavior.
4. The meaning of what we say should be explained no differently than the meaning of other behavior.
5. Verbal behavior does not have meaning in the everyday sense.
6. Dictionaries do not tell us the meaning of words.
7. When we speak or write, we are not communicating ideas, concepts, intentions, or beliefs.
8. Your convictions are "just verbal behavior."
The nature of verbal behavior

Some fun facts about verbal behavior

* Verbal behavior is learned. All of it.
* Operant learning and imitation are largely at work.
  * * < 1 month – crying
  * * ~ 4-16 weeks – particular sounds; crying varies some
  * * ~ 20 weeks – babbling
  * * ~ 6-9 months – imitative sounds
  * * ~ 10-12 months – first words
  * * ~ 3 years – 800 words based on 10-30 million words
* Learning VB requires extensive experience with a verbal community.

The nature of verbal behavior

Reconsidering conventional concepts

* Words/sentences are not behavioral units
* Meaning
  * Lies in effects or function; avoids mentalism
  * How to discover the meaning of a word
The nature of verbal behavior
Reconsidering conventional concepts

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  ~ Lies in effects or function; avoids mentalism
  ~ How to discover the meaning of a word
* "Rules" of grammar
  ~ Learned patterns of responding

The nature of verbal behavior
Reconsidering conventional concepts

* Words/sentences are not behavioral units
* Meaning
  ~ Lies in effects or function; avoids mentalism
  ~ How to discover the meaning of a word
* "Rules" of grammar
  ~ Learned patterns of responding
* Convictions/beliefs
  ~ Tacting VB over time; just verbal behavior

The nature of verbal behavior

Do you agree...

That all behavior is determined by heredity and environment?
That VB is entirely learned and must be explained only in terms of such influences?

Is something missing?

Does it seem as if these views ignore much of what we view as human nature?
If so, hang in there – we’re not done yet.
Can’t lose what we never had.

Never mind...
Mentalism – Tendency to look for causes of behavior in a mental universe that has no physical dimensions

Fully implicit – often explicit – in vernacular dialect

Mental causation “obvious” in daily life

Causes and gaps

Mind-body problem

Do mental explanations explain?

Causes and gaps

Mind-body problem

Do mental explanations explain?

Inventing inside “causes”

Causes and gaps

Mind-body problem

Do mental explanations explain?

Inventing inside “causes”

Correlation or causation?
Causes and gaps
Mind-body problem
Do mental explanations explain?
Inventing inside “causes”
Correlation or causation?
You and your homunculus

Public vs. private
What about thinking?

Emotions and feelings
Learning to respond to private events
Traits, attitudes, moods, and all that other stuff
Never mind

Public vs. private
What about thinking?
Emotions and feelings
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What about your dog?

Never mind

Public vs. private
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What about your dog?
And what to do about mentalism?

Seeing yourself

Who do you think you are?

Seeing yourself

Who do you think you are?
Perception, awareness, attention, & consciousness
The behavior of sensing
Who do you think you are?
Perception, awareness, attention, & consciousness
The behavior of sensing
Seeing that you are seeing
Seeing yourself
Knowledge & understanding
Purpose, intention, and goals
Planning on going somewhere?
Misdirection of everyday dialect

Knowledge & understanding
Purpose, intention, and goals
Planning on going somewhere?
Problem solving

Behavioral responsibility

Creativity

Credit & blame

Intent
Behavioral responsibility

Creativity
Credit & blame
Intent
Responsibility

Behavioral responsibility

Creativity
Credit & blame
Intent
Responsibility
When behavior just happens

Behavioral responsibility

Creativity
Credit & blame
Intent
Responsibility
When behavior just happens
Conscience

Behavioral responsibility

Creativity
Credit & blame
Intent
Responsibility
When behavior just happens

Stuff we’re not going to get to

Rights & values
Reasoning
Religious behavior
Culture
And more…

Radical behaviorism

“…the philosophy of a science of behavior treated as a subject matter in its own right apart of internal explanations, mental or physiological”
- B.F. Skinner 1989

Radical behaviorism

Approaches verbal behavior – including that of scientists themselves – no differently than any other kind of behavior
Intolerance for mentalism in any form
Holds that behavior cannot be fully explained by physiology
Radical behaviorism

A matter of opinion?
Selling radical behaviorism
Maintaining two repertoires
Part of the foundation of your clinical skills

talkingaboutbehavior.co