The Behavior Analyst Certification Board and the Profession of Behavior Analysis

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ABSTRACT

As applied behavior analysis has matured as a field, matters regarding credentialing have followed. Such issues surround how to identify quality behavior analytic services and to ensure that they are delivered to consumers. The Behavior Analyst Certification Board was developed to address such concerns. In this paper, we discussed the current status and impact of the BACB, along with several challenges that are facing the profession. Suggested solutions for managing these challenges are provided.

Descriptors: behavior analyst certification board, professional issues

As applied behavior analysis (ABA) has matured as a field over the last four decades, matters regarding credentialing have followed. Such issues, common and comparable to other developing disciplines, surround how to identify and ensure that quality behavior analytic services are delivered to consumers. The need for some means of identifying qualified behavior analyst practitioners on a broad scale became increasingly apparent as substantial funding became available for behavior analytic services, including that for the increasing numbers of people with autism (Shook & Favell, 1996). This funding stream attracted, in addition to qualified behavior analysts, individuals whose behavior analytic skills were questionable and whose motivations appeared to be based heavily on monetary inducements. The resulting poor quality of service delivered by less qualified practitioners had an adverse effect on the field of ABA in general, and the reputation of qualified behavior analysts in particular.

In large part due to this state of affairs, the Behavior Analyst Certification Board® (BACB®) certification program was spawned in 1998. This BACB certification effort was intended to (a) provide consumers with a basic credential that identified a qualified behavior analysis practitioner, (b) increase the quality of behavior analysis services available to the consumer, and (c) increase the amount of behavior analysis services available. The BACB currently offers certification for behavior analysts at two

levels: Board Certified Behavior Analyst® (BCBA®) and Board Certified Associate Behavior Analyst® (BCABA®)*.¹ Each of these levels has specific degree, course work and experience requirements that applicants must meet to take the BCBA or BCABA written exam. Once certified, continuing education requirements must be met to maintain certification (for further information see the BACB website: www.bacb.com).

In this paper, we briefly discuss the current status and impact of the Behavior Analyst Certification Board. In addition, we review several of the critical professional challenges now facing the profession of behavior analysis. Possible solutions to these challenges are explored, and the reader is offered suggestions for how he or she may take personal action to meet them.

The BACB Today

The viability and influence of the BACB's certification process is evident in a wide range of measurable domains:

- The BCBA and BCABA credentialing programs were accredited by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA) in August 2007. The NCCA is the accreditation body of the National Organization for Competency Assurance, considered the premier organization which defines and enforces the highest standards in its constituent certi-

fying groups (National Organization for Competency Assurance, 2005). This accreditation marks a milestone for BACB certification, further establishing its credibility as a process and as a credential.

- The number of certificants has steadily increased to nearly 6000 individuals world-wide (as of 2007). This growth has been seen despite increasingly stringent requirements in coursework and experience requirements and adjustments in the examinations' passing cut-scores (see Figure 1).
- The number of BACB approved course sequences in universities has increased substantially, now to 167 course sequences distributed across 121 universities (see Figures 2 and 3).
- Contingencies associated with the BACB have fostered an increase in behavior analysis training and certification internationally, particularly in Europe (Hughes & Shook, 2007). The number of universities with approved course sequences and BACB certificants outside the U.S. has grown steadily (see Figures 2 and 3).
- Continuing education is a vital and thriving enterprise, with over 100 BACB Approved Continuing Education providers, offering thousands of hours of training annually.
- While it is difficult to quantify the increase in the amount of behavior analysis services available, the increased number of certificants practicing and the steady call for more suggest a robust climate for behavior analytic services. Countless po-

¹ *In May 2007 the BACB voted to change the title of the BCABA from Associate to Assistant.

sitions for BACB certificants have been established in both public and private sectors, across a wide array of educational and treatment services, and in virtually every region in the U.S. and abroad.

Current Challenges in the Profession of Behavior Analysis

BACB certification in behavior analysis has combined with other factors, such as the demand for behavior analysis in the treatment of persons with autism, to foster the development and growth of the profession of behavior analysis. As the profession continues to expand, new challenges and opportunities will emerge. Current challenges include maintaining the right to practice, obtaining certification recognition, and obtaining recognition as a discipline. These challenges are discussed in the next few sections, along with some possible solutions.

Maintaining the Right to Practice

The right to practice is arguably the greatest challenge currently facing professional behavior analyst practitioners and the field. If the practice of qualified behavior analysts is prohibited or severely limited in some manner, there will be little need for certification or university training of ABA practitioners, and the field may well regress to the level it was less than a decade ago.

The principle threat appears to come from other credentialed professionals, such as those in psychology, who in several states have placed phrases such as “behavior analysis and therapy” in their state licensure acts and lay claim to the practice of ABA. Although it is the policy of the BACB that professionals other than BACB certificants who are appropriately trained and experienced in ABA should be able to engage in its practice, the BACB actively supports and encourages BACB certificants’ right to practice, including outside of the purview of psychology or any other licensure. Solutions are currently being pursued on both national and state levels by the BACB, principally establishing ways in which properly credentialed professionals, regardless of discipline, are allowed and enabled to practice in their area of expertise. While the perspective and tone of these negotiations is respectful, the right

Figure 1: Cumulative number of certificants by year.

Figure 2: Cumulative number of approved course sequences by year

Figure 3: Cumulative number of universities with approved course sequences by year.

of certified behavior analysts to practice will not be compromised. This challenge for the BACB and associated behavioral organizations, such as the Association of Professional Behavior Analysts (APBA) and the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI), constitutes the most critical and potentially far reaching issue in ABA today. Individual behavior analysts should work with their national and state professional associations to track legislative initiatives and other actions that might threaten their right to practice. Once these threats are identified, behavior analysts should be prepared to work through these professional associations to neutralize the problem. Additional suggestions for establishing mechanisms to intervene are offered below.

Obtaining Certification Recognition

Both behavior analysts' right to practice and discrete professional identity can be fostered by the recognition of BACB certifications. These certifications help to provide assurance that the professional holding them is qualified to practice in the distinct profession of behavior analysis. For most consumers, government agencies, and organizational entities, the professional credential defines and legitimizes a profession. Recognition of BACB certification is also advantageous for consumers and practitioners because (a) the certification requirements do not differ from jurisdiction-to-jurisdiction or require formal reciprocity agreements between states and countries, (b) the BACB certification is controlled by the profession and can not be influenced by special-interest lobbying that can result in governmental or political decisions changing the requirements or content of the credential, and (c) the BACB certification process is cost-neutral to governments and does not require that special legislation be passed to authorize a credentialing process or the formation of government boards to oversee the profession. Governments simply need to recognize BACB certifications.

Obtaining Recognition as a Discipline

Because behavior analysis has often been viewed as part of psychology, sometimes behavior analysts have been required to have psychology licenses in order to practice

behavior analysis. Although behavior analysis training in universities historically may have been housed in psychology departments, this is no longer the case. The majority of current BACB approved course sequences no longer reside in departments of psychology, with more being found in education departments than in psychology departments.

Furthermore, the training required to become a licensed psychologist typically contains little or no content in ABA, and requires no experience in its application. Some psychology departments do offer considerable training and experience in ABA; however, they are the exception rather than the rule.

As the profession of behavior analysis continues to develop, it will become apparent that behavior analysis does not fall entirely within an existing discipline and that it can be claimed by none. Behavior analysis will need to claim its right to be a discipline unto itself and should strive to be recognized as such. Only then will the pressures subside to require behavior analysts practicing behavior analysis to hold licenses of other professions.

Proposed Solutions to Challenges Facing the Profession of Behavior Analysis

Develop Effective State Professional Organizations

Most professional right-to-practice and certification recognition issues are controlled at the state level by state legislatures and state agencies. For example, state legislatures usually regulate and recognize professional credentials, and governmental agencies usually determine what credentials are required to work in specific positions, do certain tasks, and access various funding streams. Most professions have state-level influence in these matters, usually through lobbyists who understand the workings of the systems well and are retained by the state professional organization.

With large organizations, strong in numbers and resources, this system of influencing policy and practice is particularly formidable. When it is aimed at issues that impact ABA, such as curtailing the right to practice, counter measures are required. In such cases, professional behavior analysts

must adopt similar strategies in order to impact legislative and governmental decisions. This political involvement may be difficult and unpleasant to most behavior analysts who have often, by intelligent design, fashioned careers that have removed them from this level of political contact.

This type of activity must typically emanate from an organized group of behavior analysts, located within the geographic area affected by the actions of other organizations, agencies or the legislature. Unfortunately, approximately half of the states in the U.S. do not have such a state professional organization for behavior analysts. Forming a state organization must be the first priority and of upmost importance for professional behavior analysts living in those states. Regardless of the structure, the behavioral organization must be oriented and equipped to initiate and respond to actions that affect its practice. What is required is a strikingly different repertoire of skills and strategies than is involved in holding conferences or virtually any other professional activity. Individuals seeking to impact public policy through state organizations might look to the Florida, California, and New York State Associations for Behavior Analysis, three of the largest and arguably most well-developed state professional associations, as models. All three have long-standing, active public policy committees and paid representation in their respective state capitals.

State behavior analysis organizations with designs on influencing public policy should have public policy committees focused on that goal. These committees should consist of individuals who are interested and experienced in governmental affairs, and who have or can make political contacts. For the committee to be most efficient and effective, the members should be willing to serve for multiple years rather than to limit service to a shorter duration. It also will be helpful to have a representative in the state capital. For fledgling state behavior analysis organizations, this may mean a volunteer who lives in the state capital, has some experience and contacts in government, and who is willing to make time when political needs dictate their presence. As the organization and its coffers mature, it typically retains increasingly larger amounts of time from

an independent lobbyist. The lobbyist will represent other organizations as well, so it is important that there not be conflicts of interest among the lobbyist's clients. Often an organization will employ one or more lobbyists before a good match is found.

The public policy committee should be familiar with all state laws and regulations that govern the practice of ABA and BACB certificants. Particular attention should be given to the licensure laws of other professions. State regulations may be distributed across a number of agencies and fall under a number of governing categories such as statute, rule, regulation, and guidelines. The committee should monitor not only how the profession of behavior analysis is regulated, it should track where BACB credentials are required and funded, and what insurance companies recognize and reimburse those holding BACB credentials. The committee should determine if the existing governance help or harm the practice of ABA and BACB certificants. If the state regulation hinders practice, a rectifying strategy should be implemented; if regulation helps practice, it should be protected.

The committee should further identify possible detractors and their reasons for doing so. Likewise, the committee should identify supporters, particularly parents and legislators, and reasons why they support behavior analytic activities. The committee should also form issue-specific coalitions with other groups and cultivate contacts in the legislature and state agencies, including supporting legislators when they are seeking office. Additional committee activities should include establishing contact with email lists; providing training or conference sessions for supporters, parents, and other professionals; and establishing communication networks.

While this myriad array of activities may appear formidable and unrealistic, they are most essential to the practice of behavior analysis. In sum, it is crucial that individual behavior analysts become involved in influencing public policy in their state. If the state does not have a professional behavior analysis association, individuals should contact other behavior analysts in their state and form an association (all BACB certificants in a state can be identified and emailed through the

Certificant Registry on BACB.com). If the state has an association but does not have a public policy committee, individuals should work with the association's officers to form one. If the state association has a committee, individuals should contact the committee and offer their services.

Influence Public Policy at the National Level

Behavior analysis must have a voice in Washington D.C. and perhaps other national capitals to influence how the field is affected by the federal government, national agencies, and other professions. While part of this national need and agenda rests on protecting behavior analysis from undesirable decisions and actions, there is also immense positive potential in establishing and maintaining a national presence both geographically and politically. There are opportunities, similar to those at the state level, to inculcate behavior analysis into federal legislation and BACB certificants into specific job categories. Furthermore, federal funding is available for projects well-suited to behavior analysts and should be pursued vigorously by national behavior analytic organizations. Proactive efforts on this level are essential if behavior analysis is to positively impact the literally millions of individuals whose lives would be enhanced through ABA.

A major function assumed by most national professional organizations involves tracking and affecting national policy as it relates to that profession. Usually national professional organizations are represented by lobbyists in the organizations' national capital, who coordinate the national effort in conjunction with professionals and state components within the organization.

National organizations, like ABAI and APBA, can provide much-needed support, consultation, and coordination for state professional organizations in order to influence public policy at both the state and national levels. Often, there is little reason to "re-invent the wheel" on a state-by-state basis. National organizations can become a repository for examples of successful interventions and techniques that may prove useful to developing state organizations. National organizations can also act as clearing houses for regulatory, certification recognition, and certificants' funding data discussed previously. These data could be

made available to the state organizations and compiled to answer the inevitable questions from legislators, government officials, and insurance companies regarding "what other states are doing" in the regulation of ABA and recognition of BACB certification.

Organizations with an international membership may be equally effective in providing meaningful training, education, and professional credentialing for all of its members, though it is not clear that the nature of political support provided in the U.S. will translate easily to other countries. Regardless of the particulars which prevail in individual circumstances, organizations with national and international memberships can lend support to efforts in each country and demonstrate that behavior analytic practice has a broad based representation around the world.

All of these activities can be accomplished through one or more of the existing national organizations. Individual behavior analysts should support organizations that engage in these important activities by becoming members, volunteering their time, and perhaps opening their wallets. If the behavior analysts find that organizations are not engaged in one or more of the activities listed above, they should encourage them to do so.

Summary

As the field of ABA has matured, its professional practice has similarly evolved. A critical aspect of its development has been the establishment of a credentialing system that certifies behavior analysts. This program was designed to identify professionals with basic qualifications and to increase the quality and amount of behavior analysis services available to consumers. The development and refinement of the certification process across three decades has produced a system that has proven to be a reliable, robust and functional method of identifying and advancing the competent and ethical practice of behavior analysis. Today, approximately 6,000 behavior analysts are certified across 28 countries, and the BACB programs have achieved national accreditation.

This solid record of growth and refinement continues, for example by enhancing supervision requirements and increasing the standards for professional

conduct. As these changes continue, a number of issues are facing the field of behavior analysis in general and the certification program in particular. Among these, perhaps the most formidable is the challenge to behavior analysts to practice their profession. Threats against practice emanate from professional organizations as well as governmental and legislative bodies.

The need to address professional issues calls for skills, strategies, and organizational structures that have not been common in the field. These include developing mechanisms on the state, regional and national levels that can mobilize and influence public policy and legislation. This requires competent and responsive political activity at all levels, which in turn requires organizational structures at both local and national levels that are oriented toward

protecting and promoting the discipline, field and profession. If behavior analysis is to realize its full potential in improving lives, it must analyze and alter its structure and strategies to face the challenges that lie ahead.

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AUTHOR NOTE

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