In Response

A Response to Stewart, McElwee, and Ming

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In a recent article published in *The Behavior Analyst*, Stewart, McElwee, and Ming (2010) suggested that “scientific experts in scientific contexts” (p. 129) should use more “technically accurate and precise labeling” (p. 130) when describing the Assessment of Basic Learning Abilities (ABLA) in published articles. They concluded by stating, “We believe that increasing the accuracy and precision of the labels used to describe this or analogous protocols can improve their potential by increasing their predictive and explanatory power in practical and research applications as well as by facilitating their further development” (p. 130). Before reacting to the suggestions of Stewart et al., we will briefly summarize the ABLA and the main thrust of the suggestions by Stewart et al.

Kerr, Meyerson, and Flora (1977) developed the ABLA to assess the ease or difficulty with which persons with developmental disabilities might learn some basic discriminations that appear to be required to perform a variety of educational, prevocational, and vocational tasks. When administering the ABLA, the tester attempts to teach to a testee, using standard prompting and reinforcement procedures, six tasks referred to as *levels*, including a simple imitation task and

five two-choice discriminations. Pass–fail performance on the levels of the ABLA test have proven to have good predictive validity for the ease or difficulty with which persons with developmental disabilities are able to learn a variety of training tasks (Martin, Thorsteinsson, Yu, Martin, & Vause, 2008). The labels given to the six levels of the ABLA by Kerr et al. were Level 1, imitation; Level 2, position discrimination; Level 3, visual discrimination; Level 4, match to sample; Level 5, auditory discrimination; and Level 6, auditory–visual combined discrimination. Stewart et al. (2010) criticized the description of each ABLA level and offered what they considered to be a more technically accurate alternative description (see Table 1).

Our reactions to the suggestions of Stewart et al. (2010) are as follows. First, in an earlier review (Martin & Yu, 2000), we provided a more detailed description of the types of discriminations involved at ABLA Levels 2 through 6 (see Table 2) than the alternative description offered by Stewart et al. Although they cited the Martin and Yu review, they made no reference to the detailed description of the discriminations involved at each ABLA level that we had provided. A comparison of Tables 1 and 2 suggests that our description includes theirs, but with more detail.

In our discussions with Nancy Kerr and Lee Meyerson before they passed away, they were certainly aware that the names of the various

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TABLE 1

Conventional and suggested alternative descriptions of levels employed in the ABLA (from Stewart, McElwee, & Ming, 2010)

ABLA level	Conventional description	Suggested alternative description
1	Imitation	Simple operant
2	Position discrimination	Simple simultaneous visual discrimination
3	Visual discrimination	Simple simultaneous visual discrimination (not based on position)
4	Match to sample	Visual conditional discrimination involving similarity of color and shape across sample and comparisons
5	Auditory discrimination	Auditory–visual conditional discrimination
6	Auditory–visual combined	Auditory–visual conditional discrimination (not based on position)

levels they used did not convey a technically accurate description of the types of discriminations that were involved at each level. Nevertheless, they felt that the names that they used were very useful in communicating information about the ABLA to direct-care staff whom they hoped would use it on a daily basis. Indeed, Stewart et al. (2010) acknowledge that “it may indeed be the case that nontechnical language is sometimes more useful when communicating with laypeople” (p. 129). Our second reaction to Stewart et al. is that we consider the conventional names of the ABLA levels to be *always* more

useful when communicating with laypeople about the ABLA than the alternative description. In our view, the conventional labels used for the levels of the ABLA are quite acceptable *as labels*, especially when communicating with laypeople. As recently suggested by Friman (2010), behavior analysts need to refer to our principles and procedures in more common terms if we want laypeople to “buy into” behavior analysis. Third, Stewart et al. (2010) imply that scientific experts should consistently use the alternative detailed descriptions (see Table 1) when referring to ABLA levels. In our view,

TABLE 2

A description of the types of discriminations required at each ABLA Level (from Martin & Yu, 2000)

ABLA levels	Types of discriminations
Level 1. Imitation	A simple imitation
Level 2. Position discrimination	A simultaneous visual discrimination with position, color, shape, and size as relevant cues
Level 3. Visual discrimination	A simultaneous visual discrimination with color, shape, and size as relevant cues
Level 4. Match-to-sample discrimination	A conditional visual–visual identity discrimination with color, shape, and size as relevant cues
Level 5. Auditory discrimination	A conditional auditory–visual nonidentity discrimination, with pitch, pronunciation, and duration as relevant auditory cues, and with position, color, shape, and size as relevant visual cues
Level 6. Auditory–visual discrimination	A conditional auditory–visual discrimination, with the same auditory cues as Level 5, and with only color, shape, and size as relevant visual cues

labels are economical and serve a communicative purpose in scientific publications, and it is not necessary that every publication on a specific topic include the detailed descriptions for commonly used labels. Nevertheless, we commend Stewart et al. for supplementing earlier efforts (Martin & Yu, 2000; Pear, 2001) to remind researchers on the ABLA that the ABLA levels do not convey all of the details of the types of discriminations that are involved at each level.

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