PBIS May Not Qualify as Classical Applied Behavior Analysis. So What?

Thomas S. Critchfield¹

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Abstract Some disagreement exists over whether Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) embodies the features of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) as described in a classic 1968 paper by Baer, Wolf, and Risley. When it comes to disseminating interventions at a societal level, a more compelling issue is whether ABA should become more like PBIS.

The set of practices known as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) has received considerable attention for its scope of implementation and for the systems-level outcomes that it creates when implemented with integrity. Those accomplishments are detailed elsewhere, including by Horner and Sugai (2015), and so will not be itemized here. Another noteworthy feature of PBIS is the extent to which it has been greeted with skepticism and, occasionally, open hostility by professionals in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA; e.g., Anderson and Kincaid 2005; Johnston et al. 2006)—this despite the assertion by writers like Horner and Sugai that ABA is part of the inspiration for PBIS.

Such discord over how to categorize PBIS is but one manifestation of a recurring ritual in ABA known as *baerwolfrisleying*, which consists of ruminating over whether a given practice or research project really qualifies as ABA according to specifications of Baer et al. (1968, “Some current dimensions of applied behavior analysis”). As an author and action editor, I have often observed *baerwolfrisleying* by peer

reviewers who fretted that a manuscript did not possess all of the characteristics of ABA that Baer et al. (1968) identified, and I have seen manuscripts (including some that reviewers regarded as otherwise engaging) rejected from ABA journals largely on the basis that they did not. A close inspection of PBIS critiques by ABA professionals reveals a not-insignificant amount of *baerwolfrisleying*, and so it is unsurprising that in their target article Horner and Sugai felt compelled to defend the correspondence between PBIS and the criteria of Baer et al. (1968).

Baerwolfrisleying assumes that practices that correspond to the Baer et al. (1968) criteria are good, while practices that do not are bad. The first clause in this assumption is supported by considerable evidence; the second sometimes feels more xenophobic than empirical. Yet for the sake of making a point, let us align with critics and assert that PBIS does *not* qualify as ABA in the model of Baer et al. (1968). To say that PBIS is not ABA in this classical sense negates none of the major contributions with which PBIS is normally credited. It remains the most widely implemented approach to intervention ever inspired by behavioral principles. It continues to reach hundreds of thousands of school-aged children and to produce measurable benefits in numerous schools.

Of primary importance in this admission is that PBIS arguably is our only existing model of the kind of society-wide behavioral engineering that Skinner (e.g., 1953) liked to envision. Pioneers of PBIS did not just design an effective framework for intervention. They also did what was necessary for broad systems (states and school districts) to embrace and, in some cases, mandate the use of that framework. In fact, these two accomplishments probably are intertwined. As Rogers (2003) concluded in his influential analysis of the factors that influence dissemination, in order to be implemented at scale interventions must be crafted to work within existing cultural practices. History is full perfectly good behavioral

✉ Thomas S. Critchfield
tsritic@ilstu.edu

¹ Illinois State University, Normal, IL, USA

interventions that have not achieved wide acceptance (e.g., direct instruction, precision teaching, personalized systems of instruction), in part because they conflicted with entrenched cultural practices (e.g., Watkins 1997). Therefore, it is entirely plausible that the reason why PBIS fails to qualify as classical ABA is it was expressly engineered for scaling up, whereas classical ABA, as Baer et al. (1968) described it, was not.

One frustrating thing about *baerwolfrisleying* is that it places attention on the topography of intervention-related behaviors while distracting from the considerable variability in behavior problems that need to be solved. For example, because PBIS operates simultaneously for thousands of students, it is, perhaps, not sufficiently analytical in the sense suggested by Baer et al. (1968), which means functionally analyzing individual behavior. Yet an important goal of PBIS is primary prevention which, if successful, eliminates the need for analyzing the behavior of most individuals. Prevention and problem resolution require different strategies, something that PBIS acknowledges (mechanisms are in place for intensive intervention when prevention fails) but Baer et al. (1968) did not. In short, *baerwolfrisleying* attempts to squeeze pegs of many shapes into a single hole.

Another frustrating aspect of *baerwolfrisleying* is the cliquishness that is inherent in debates about who qualifies as a “real” behavior analyst. Only (a subset of) behavior analysts lose sleep over this classification. The rest of the world is concerned with solving practical problems using whatever technology happens to be available for this. Right now, PBIS, but not classical ABA (assuming PBIS really is not part of it), is creating actuarial-level changes in school-related behaviors. If there is a club for people who wish to improve the world, it should be joinable by open invitation and predicated on the notion that results matter. *Baerwolfrisleying* distracts from these goals and tends to divide rather than unite.

Ultimately, it is unfortunate that Horner and Sugai felt compelled to defend the relationship between PBIS and classical ABA, for two reasons. First, doing so consumed journal space that might have been used to further describe PBIS and its empirically validated effects. Second, doing so may be counterproductive if this obscures the significance of genuinely important distinctions between PBIS and classical ABA. The central question embedded in *baerwolfrisleying* (“Why isn’t PBIS more like ABA?”) quite possibly is inverted from the one we ought to be asking. Given classical ABA’s long history of creating powerful interventions, but its limited success at society-wide dissemination, perhaps the more constructive question concerns why ABA is not more like PBIS.

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