Are We Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places? Comment on Dixon et al.

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Abstract Dixon and colleagues (Behavior Analysis in Practice 8(1):7-15, 2015) used publication rates of faculty in programs with Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) approved course sequences as a proxy measure for the quality of the program. The paper is important because it begins a conversation about what the characteristics of a quality program should be. Low publication rates for most of these programs and their faculties were a source of concern for Dixon, et al., but from the perspective of measurement validity, this finding is not necessarily bad news. Program quality is a multi-dimensional construct, and for some dimensions, publication rates are likely to be irrelevant.

Keywords Assessing quality · Quality of training · Validity

Dixon et al. (2015) have started an important conversation for our field regarding how we measure the quality of a training program in applied behavior analysis. To answer this question, Dixon and colleagues used publication rates of faculty affiliated with programs whose course sequences have been approved by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) as a proxy measure for quality. The reported data suggest that faculty in these programs are not, on the whole, publishing a great deal. The suggested implication is that many of these programs are not high quality. From Dixon et al's perspective, therefore, low publication rates are not

good news. I would like to suggest that this finding does not necessarily represent bad news.

Why Isn't This Bad News?

In any assessment, it is necessary to have valid measures. Validity questions can only be answered in the context of decisions and actions that will result from the assessment (Messick 1995). Program quality is a multi-dimensional construct, so it is likely that the measure of faculty publication rates is a valid measure for some purposes but not for others. There are many different consumers of applied behavior analysis graduate programs, and each of these stakeholders will have a different definition of quality. A student looking to enter a training program may select a program, at least in part, because of the publication record of the faculty. In this instance, publication rates may be a valid measure if quality of a program is defined by attracting students. That is the good news for using publication rates as a measure of the quality of a training program.

That same student, upon graduating from a BACB training program, may define quality as the probability of being hired. In this context, low publication rates are not necessarily bad news because publication rates may be irrelevant to this dimension of quality. We do not know if faculty publication rates make a job candidate more or less attractive to employers. Employers seeking to hire well-trained behavior analysts may define quality as training programs producing prospective employees who can relatively independently achieve positive outcomes in field settings. Because faculty publication rates are not likely to be a valid measure of this dimension of quality, low publication rates are not necessarily bad news.

Clients receiving behavior analytic services are likely to define the quality of training programs by how effectively

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the graduate of a program resolves clinical problems. It is an open question if being trained by faculty with high publication rates results in more effective clinical services. Since this relationship is unknown, it is not necessarily bad news that some programs have low publication rates.

Applied behavior analysis has been defined as producing socially important outcomes in socially important settings (Baer et al. 1968), and this may constitute the ultimate criterion for judging the quality of a practitioner training program. Yet, this functional definition of quality does not specify what kind of training is necessary for graduates of ABA programs to accomplish the desired behavioral outcomes. From an operant perspective, presumably, there are multiple ways of shaping useful behavior-change repertoires. Working with faculty with lengthy publications records is perhaps one means but not the only one. Low publication rates are not necessarily bad news if good training outcomes can be achieved in other ways.

Dixon and colleagues are correct in asserting that the function of the *science* of behavior analysis is knowledge production; however, this is not the function of *practitioner training programs*. It can be argued that the function of such programs is to incorporate the current knowledge of behavior analysis into the practice of behavior analysis, thereby increasing the likelihood of benefit for clients. More and more human service disciplines are adopting the evidence-based practice framework to guide the decisions that practitioners make. Slocum et al. (2014) have argued that the evidence-based practice of applied behavior analysis requires that practitioners base their decisions on three sources: best available evidence, clinical expertise, and client values and context. Learning to do this in a clinical context requires different skills than are required for research. It is not unreasonable to assume that those with extensive clinical experience are best positioned to develop the skills of other practitioners. A measure of faculty research productivity may be irrelevant to this dimension of quality. If so, then it is not necessarily bad news that faculty of practitioner training programs have low publication rates. We do not know if training programs are actually developing the skills required to be an evidence-based practitioner of applied behavior analysis. Very different metrics will be required to make that judgment.

Dixon and colleagues make the important point that behavior analytic research and application are tightly intertwined in a scientist-practitioner model. They go on to say that the methods for evaluating clinical interventions are largely the same as those used in evaluating research effects. Despite these similarities, there are important differences in the way practitioners and researchers interact with the data. Researchers use the methods of single case design to experimentally evaluate the effects of independent variables in ways that maximize inter-observer agreement (IOA) on effects. Practitioners, however, do not always engage in practices that

increase the “believability” of their data. In practice, there are infrequent checks for IOA, and an intervention’s effectiveness may be evaluated using an AB design. Rarely is there the luxury of extending baselines to achieve a stable pattern of responding that would be satisfactory to the researcher before intervening. The simple fact is that in clinical contexts there are too few resources and too little time to behave as a researcher.

The preceding matters because we all teach what we know. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that practitioners who are trained by researchers acquire skills that are effective in research settings, while those who are trained by practitioners acquire skills that are more likely to be immediately relevant in practice settings. This is not bad news for practitioner training programs, even if faculty publication rates are low.

Is There Any Good News?

I have tried to make the case that low publication rates of faculty in programs offering BACB approved course sequences are not necessarily bad news; however, the absence of bad news does not make for good news. Is there any good news to take from this discussion? In some ways, this is reminiscent of a discussion in the early 1980s between Jack Michael and Don Baer (Baer 1981; Michael 1980). In his Presidential Address at the Association for Behavior Analysis conference in 1980, Michael made the case that a quality behavior analysis graduate training program should emphasize research. The following year, Baer in his Presidential Address at the same conference argued that programs should not necessarily require all graduate students to be researchers. Both men based their arguments on logical analyses. The good news is that Dixon and colleagues have advanced the discussion by proposing a metric for assessing the quality of a program. Now, those of us who are not satisfied with this as a measure have to find a better one. This can only be good news for the field.

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