Driving With the Rear View Mirror

Michael F. Cataldo¹

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What would Drs. Baer, Wolf, and Risley's commentary be? Because they cannot tell us, at the request of the editor, this commentary will attempt an answer based on having worked with them at the University of Kansas during the formative years of ABA immediately following the publication of their 1968 article. Here are some observations.

THEN

"I always like to make things as simple as possible, but no simpler" - Einstein

The Destination

- Drs. Baer, Wolf and Risley (Don, Mont, and Todd) were inclined to look ahead, not only at what was just before them, but what could be over the horizon. Little time and effort was spent looking behind them except to occasionally check out where we were all coming from.
- They did not see a conflict between the Experimental Analysis of Behavior (EAB) and Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). Rather, the purpose was to launch and then nurture a parallel effort to EAB. Both were valuable; each complemented the other (Baer et al. 1968).
- In contrast to Critchfield and Reed's (2017) retrospective review of the past 50 years related to their 1968 article, at the time their objectives were clear and straight forward. So, where were they headed at the time? The objective, the destination, was Social Importance. They held that the ability to make a meaningful difference was vital to our field.

✉ Michael F. Cataldo
cataldo@kennedykrieger.org

¹ Kennedy Krieger Institute, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD, USA

- If the promise of the principles and basic findings from the experimental analysis of behavior could be employed to make meaningful differences in important problems involving people's behavior, then the field they were envisioning would grow and prosper; if not, it would surely continue, but as a modest addition to the field of psychological science, a graduate course or two, and perhaps a chapter or section in a text book.
- The 1968 article was the first waypoint on a journey. It was not to be a checklist, but rather a guide. What they accomplished over the years is more important as a road map or guideline than what they wrote in 1968.
- They (we) would arrive at the intended destination when a significant problem was solved on a large scale, recognized by other relevant professional groups, and so valued by society that the solution was sustained.¹

Navigating The Journey

- The road for Don, Mont, and Todd back then was considerably rougher than ours is now. Previously, their experiences in Departments of Psychology were not very positive. In the 1960's and 1970's, the Department of Human Development and Family Life at the University of Kansas had little structure. The Experimental Analysis of Behavior favored subject populations and experimental questions far different from their interests.
- Complaining about their situation was not their style. Perhaps it was the culture of the 60's, or the personalities of this group, or just good common sense, that formed their approach to problems which was: "Don't bring me the problem unless you bring me a solution". Whining was received in one of two ways - either no attention or a somewhat stern correction.
- Heeding their own advice, Don, Mont, and Todd proceeded to take charge of making changes in their immediate environment as well as those that would transform the field. They established research settings (a preschool, collaboration with an institution for persons with IDD) where they could conduct applied behavioral research. They designed a Graduate Training Program in the Department so generations of professionals could advance the agenda they envisioned. In addition, they also began a journal as a vehicle to influence and shape the field of Applied Behavior Analysis.
- Professional organizations, agencies, journals, professional conventions and conferences were seen not as ends in and of themselves, but rather as vehicles for advancing a field. Such vehicles could sit idling for years, being maintained by

¹ At KU, Todd worked simultaneously on several different areas: daycare, preschool education, inner-city crime prevention, language, child health and safety. He explored an ever increasing range of social problems, societal venues, and independent variables. Then he moved to Alaska, and as Head of MRDD, implemented his approach to solving problems of persons with IDD on a state-wide basis. Mont focused on one problem, adolescent crime and delinquency, exploring every facet of how this problem could be addressed, carefully and consistently targeting the outcome variables of recidivism rate and successful integration into society (e.g., school graduation, gainful employment, etc.). His Achievement Place Model has been adopted and extended nationwide as a part of the Boys Town Program. It had then and still has the lowest recidivism rate and best outcomes for community integration in the country; and it is sustained by federal, state and commercial reimbursement of services.

membership, readership, and the like and then, when necessary, with the right vision, leadership, individual sacrifice and energy, they could be put into motion and used to carry a field in a new direction. Don, Mont, and Todd saw these vehicles to be used for taking the field in the direction they were heading.

- The type of experimental design and analytical approach was to be dictated by the experimental question, not determined by discipline bias. Single subject approaches were useful, and could be superior, but only in some situations. Similarly, independent variables should be judged by the magnitude and efficiency of their effect.²
- Eventually, applied solutions should be published in those journals most relevant to the problem and read by the professional group involved in the area; *JABA* was a useful journal for initial studies of behavior change.³
- Editorial discretion was critical to guiding the direction of the field. Editorial bias is an important tool that can be utilized for better or worse.⁴

NOW

“Adaptation: a change or the process of change by which an organism or species becomes better suited to its environment” - Websters

Where Are We?

Don, Mont, and Todd might be amazed, and would certainly be proud, at what has been accomplished in 50 years: the sophistication of ABA research, the integration with EAB at many levels, the financial viability and well-tuned nature of our vehicles for maintaining and directing the field (i.e., journals and professional organizations), the respect by other areas of Psychology and beyond (e.g., NIH, and medicine). Most importantly, they would like that Behavior Analysis (as we call it now) is considered

² Todd was as intrigued with how the physical environment, activity schedules, and the like could influence behavior, as he was with the power and impact of differential reinforcement. All were important to changing behavior and all should be studied to see which resulted in the most efficient outcome.

³ For example, journals about early childhood education eventually were the primary outlet for the results of Todd's research on daycare, and for Mont's work it was journals dealing with crime and delinquency and juvenile justice.

⁴ Soon after the birth of the Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, the editorial bias was toward innovation. During Todd's editorship, for example, it was not uncommon to hear him complain about the pile of manuscripts on his desk. To the right was a small pile of those he was most excited about, they were innovative, novel, and showed new applications, behavioral targets never considered before, new ways to understand and change behavior. On the left side of his desk was a much larger pile consisting of systematic replications, which while important to science, added very little new information and no innovation. They were frequently and vociferously labeled as treatises on 'how many angels could dance on the head of a pin'. That the "angel treatises" followed strict tenets of the original 1968 article as to dimensions to be followed, showed methodological rigor, and mimicked a handful of preferred experimental designs, were of little value to Todd. Studies that showed new behavioral targets, new ways of helping people, were much more exciting and often were granted considerable editorial dispensations.

the preferred approach for many kinds of behavior problems, especially those of persons with autism and other forms of IDD, as well as with children, to name but a few.

On the other hand, they would likely be taken aback by the degree to which their suggestions in 1968 are now being dissected and found to be confusing, let alone a detriment to the field. This would be especially so for Don, for whom clarity of his writing was foremost. On the front of his office door was the sign: “Word Merchant.” Perhaps, he would attribute the current discourse to the difference between then - when what needed to happen was so clear - and now - when we may be unsure of what is most important to do next. Perhaps, issues of how best to interpret and use their 1968 suggestions are a sign of some discontent, a feeling that something needs to be done again to move the field in another new direction.

Where Do We Want To Go?

Over time Don, Mont, and Todd softened their criticism of naysayers, whiners and those who dwelled on what was wrong with the world... something along the lines of: “Better to light just one candle than to curse the darkness.” In fact, if one goes back far enough into the back issues of *JABA*, there you will find an ad for *JABA* to that effect.

Present and predicted changes in the broader system in which we operate may be a cause of some of this uneasiness, fuzziness about what we should be doing with our field. The cost of higher education together with the efficiencies of distance learning will begin the process of school closings as soon as a highly respected certifying organization exists and data are made available on student performance. Within a few decades, only first tier and community colleges may exist, which will dramatically alter the landscape of research supported by and through our graduate training programs. Another reason for concern is the rapidly dwindling federal budget for biomedical and behavioral research, which is already at its lowest level in terms of pay-lines in decades, and is again slated for another double digit reduction. On a national level, the process has already begun to shift criteria for payment of services by providers from a time-and-procedure based method to one based on outcomes, which will require ongoing individual and aggregate evidence of efficacy.

Fifty years ago, resources were difficult to garner because of how our field was viewed. Now, while viewed in a much better light, we are vying for the same shrinking resources as other areas in society. In a highly charged political environment created by increasingly scarce resources, those areas will be favored that can best demonstrate Social Importance; that make a meaningful difference in people’s lives, that can be accomplished with increasing efficiency and at lower costs, that can be (or have already been) scaled, and that are justified by actuarial data, not just a handful of demonstration studies.

Species evolve or become extinct. Businesses must grow or die. In 1968, the motivation for change was the threat of survival. Don, Mont, and Todd saw change as not only the road required for them to be able to pursue their work, but vital to the survival of our field. Does the same degree of concern exist now? Do we face a similar imperative?

Whether new areas of application or new efforts at scale, measurement of outcomes, costs, we have no shortage of threats, opportunities and challenges. The current

editorial practices related to an article in 1968 may be a good sensor (to follow the metaphor - a “check your engine” warning) for a much larger set of issues. Launch an effort to work with the field of public health to study the impact of our techniques, and acquire actuarial data on outcomes, cost savings to society, and other outcomes. Start a journal that reports on large scale clinical and educational outcomes of Behavior Analysis. Show how to address the problems and care of the elderly. The field of medicine already appreciates Behavior Analysis, but the synergies must now be targeted at prolonging health and lowering cost of care, and on a meaningful scale. The list goes on...

If after 50 years, we are facing the need for another transformation in our field, Don, Mont, and Todd modeled how we might proceed. Transformational change occurs, not because of a consensus, but because one, or a few individuals, throw themselves into the ‘breach’. Anyone want to light a candle?

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author has no conflict of interest.

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