OBM is Already Using the “Fuzzy Concept” Criteria for Applied Behavioral Research: Commentary on Critchfield and Reed

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Critchfield and Reed (2017) have penned a timely article highlighting the role of Baer, Wolf, and Risley’s (1968) article (abbreviated BWR) in defining the field of applied behavior analysis research. Critchfield and Reed cite many examples of research topics and methodologies that strain the BWR criteria for defining ABA research, and suggest that BWR has become a limiting set of criteria too small for our field. Their solution is to view the BWR defining features not as a conjoint set of features but rather as a “fuzzy concept” in which some, but not necessarily all of the criteria, would have to be present in a research study for it to be considered acceptable within an enlarged tent of ABA research. I think this is a liberating idea and a good thing for behavior analysis. That “fuzzy concept” idea may seem radical to some readers who have always used the BWR criteria as a conjoint set, but an example of just that fuzzy concept notion has been in existence for decades now in the discipline of Organizational Behavior Management (OBM) and evident in its journal, the *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management (JOBM)*.

I feel compelled to define OBM to some degree given my experience that many behavior analysts trained extensively or exclusively in basic research, or in applied areas such as those helping clients who have some form of autism, have little knowledge of OBM. OBM is an area of research, theory, and practice that focuses on the role of human behavior in contributing toward improved functioning of organizations. OBM has been behavior analytic at the core of its conceptual approaches to changing employee and manager behavior. That is evident in the founding editorial in *JOBM* by Daniels (1977), who explicitly referenced the BWR

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criteria in defining OBM. However, even before that and certainly since that time, OBM has also included concepts contributed by compatible approaches such as systems theory (Brethower, 1972, 1982; Malott, 2003), behavioral economics (Hantula & Wells, 2010), and a broader appreciation of the nexus between behavior and results shown in the works of Gilbert (1978/1996) and Rummier and Brache (1995). The inclusion of conceptual frameworks from compatible disciplines was necessary because the definition of “socially important” as representing the *Applied* dimension of BWR changes in the context of organizational application. The end result is not simply to change behavior because the behavior itself is deemed socially important, but to change behavior in a way that meaningfully helps accomplish the business results necessary to the survival of the organization. A wider understanding of organizations and their needs had to be added to standard applied behavior analysis tools if OBM was to be seen as helpful by the end users of its applied research or practice.

Because of this, some people in the behavior analytic community may not see OBM as belonging in the Applied Behavior Analysis tent because it is not “pure” applied behavior analysis. One could make similar arguments against including applications of behavioral pharmacology or behavioral economics because neuroscience and economic theory contribute, respectively, to the conceptual foundations for those applications so neither are they “pure.” Yet, in my experience, these areas are attractive to, and welcomed by, behavior analysts. Perhaps OBM does not fit neatly into the Applied Behavior Analysts tent if one adheres strictly to the BWR criteria. I noted there were no citations to *JOBM* articles of any kind in the Critchfield and Reed (2017) article. That is unfortunate, because *JOBM* explicitly models the use of Critchfield and Reed’s fuzzy concept criteria as a basis for reviewing articles. *JOBM* editor Houmanfar (2015) laid out the types of articles, content, and methodologies acceptable in *JOBM* and she made it clear that within or between-subjects research methodologies were acceptable, that conceptual articles are allowed, and that laboratory simulations of work-related behaviors are permitted as topics for inclusion. To assuage fears that the fuzzy concept criteria proposed by Critchfield and Reed are too loose or potentially dangerous for an applied behavioral journal, all I can say is that we in the OBM community have found it to be useful, productive, and entertaining over the last 40 years.

For OBM, the use of the fuzzy concept criteria so similar to those espoused by the target article may have arisen out of necessity. OBM is a small area compared to an area of application such as behavior analysis in developmental disabilities. OBM research within functioning businesses is exceptionally difficult enough on its own without even considering the BWR criteria. Simply getting permission from leaders in an organization to conduct anything resembling research is hard enough when what they want is a solution to their current problems. As a management consultant, I am paid to solve those problems, not to conduct research as I was in my former academic career. However, as an Associate Editor of *JOBM*, I must review and assess manuscripts submitted as research articles that push the boundaries of the BWR criteria when viewed as a conjoint set of defining criteria. For example, in practice, OBM practitioners often sample verbal behavior of employee populations via surveys as part of various kinds of assessments to help select or gauge impact of interventions (see, e.g. Wine, Reis, & Hantula, 2014). As Critchfield and Reed (2017) point out, lack of direct

observation of behavior may fail the BWR criteria for the *Behavioral* dimension of BWR, yet direct behavior observation in workplaces to the standard considered acceptable to *JABA* is often impractical and unsustainable by organizations. A notable exception is when direct peer-to-peer work observations are used as part of behavior-based safety processes (see Agnew & Snyder, 2008; McSween, 2003). Outside of formal behavior-based safety applications, direct observation of behavior like that found in many *JABA* articles is rare in practice, so the pool of work from which to draw research articles to submit to *JOBM* would be tiny if the conjoint set of criteria of BWR were required.

This does not mean that “anything goes” conceptually in OBM, something Critchfield and Reed (2017) caution against as well. The OBM community is far from agnostic with respect to defining what should qualify as OBM in nature. For example, I have argued that the discipline had tilted too heavily toward “behavior-only” research articles for many years, and that a performance and systems-oriented perspective required a more balanced focus on behavior and business results (Hyten, 2009). Even today, sometimes the editorial board must reject manuscripts that appear totally unrelated to anything even within our broadly defined notion of the conceptual foundations of OBM. This is at least some evidence that the use of fuzzy concept criteria does not inevitably entail conceptual chaos. In an important sense, OBM can be seen as a test case for the fuzzy concept criteria for applied behavioral research and signs of significant harm are not apparent.

All sciences have a degree of tension between conservative views of the field (“we must continue as we always have with the approaches we have always used”) and radical views (“we must sweep away old practices and develop ideas and practices afresh”) and I argue that both poles are integral to the scientific method. As individual researchers, theorists, or practitioners, most of us have a blend of conservative and radical views of scientific practice. We defend some traditional methods and we demand change of others. I have certainly held both positions on different topics, and my views on those topics also have changed over time. Given the evolution of practices within our multi-generational population of people who identify themselves as behavior analysts, a bigger tent seems in order. Adoption of Critchfield and Reed’s (2017) fuzzy concept criteria would help enlarge the tent, enliven the show, and perhaps draw a larger audience.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author has no conflict of interest.

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