Branching Out: Finding Success in New Areas of Practice

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Abstract

In recent years, researchers and practitioners in behavior analysis have called for expanding the application of the science to new, socially relevant areas. The authors of this article work in the areas of applied animal behavior and organizational behavior management, and we are often asked for guidance and mentoring to help behavior analysts transition into our domains. Here, we offer actionable guidance for bridging the gap between behavior analysis graduate training and career paths that are not yet common for behavior analysts. Working in new practice areas involves a great deal of problem solving without much support. Thus, obtaining high-quality, in-depth training in behavior analysis is essential. We recommend building competence in a new area of practice by finding a mentor or community of practice and then seeking paid employment in that area as soon as possible. Finally, when one begins to work in a new area, it is essential to be realistic and humble. We offer practical advice for implementing each of these suggestions.

Keywords career guidance · mentoring · new practice areas

In recent years, researchers and practitioners in behavior analysis have called for expanding the application of the science to new, socially relevant areas (Edwards & Poling, 2011; Friman, 2010; Normand & Kohn, 2013; Poling, 2010; Skinner, 1987). Friman (2010) asserted that most of the field's applied research addresses “one tail of the distribution of human concerns” and called for behavior analysts to also examine more common problems. Although a significant amount of research in behavior analysis involves interventions for individuals with disabilities, other areas of application have emerged. For example, a limited number of researchers and practitioners have worked in behavioral gerontology (LeBlanc, Raetz, & Feliciano, 2010), behavioral pediatrics (Allen & Hine, 2015), instructional design (Critchfield & Twyman, 2014), and addiction (Dallery, Raiff, Grabinski, & Marsch, 2019). LeBlanc, Heinicke, and Baker (2012) made a number of excellent recommendations for behavior analysts wishing to expand their practice to new clinical populations, and the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB, 2020b)

has also provided sound guidance on respecializing in new areas of practice.

Behavior analysis has also been applied outside of clinical and educational settings. Examples include animal behavior (Edwards & Poling, 2011), business (Wilder, Austin, & Casella, 2009), sports and fitness (Normand, 2008), safety (Sulzer-Azaroff & Austin, 2000), and video game design (Hopson, 2013). In a 2016 job task analysis survey conducted by the BACB (2020a), over 88% of respondents reported practicing in autism, developmental disabilities, or education. When respondents reporting work in other clinical settings, such as behavioral gerontology and behavioral pediatrics, are added, clinical and educational settings account for over 93% of the 7,107 respondents. Organizational behavior management (OBM), sports and fitness, and “other” areas of practice account for 2.73% of respondents. Although practitioners work in these areas, few graduate programs offer formal training on less common applications. Thus, individuals who are trained in behavior analysis may benefit from additional guidance to enter into these and other areas of practice.

Normand and Kohn (2013) discussed some benefits of behavior analysts branching out into new areas of practice and suggested several jobs that would allow behavior analysts to leverage their training and enter into career paths outside of autism and developmental disabilities. The positions listed included certified personal trainers and human resources assistants, which would require the behavior analyst to obtain additional training

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and/or certifications to become qualified. The careers the authors listed were accompanied by introductory information that could serve as a starting point for behavior analysts seeking to enter new domains that require minimal additional training. Many of the careers the authors suggested are most appropriate for bachelor's-level behavior analysts. In our experience, many behavior analysts looking to transition into new career paths have completed, or are in the process of completing, graduate-level training. We aim to build on previous suggestions with actionable guidance for bridging the gap between behavior analysis graduate training and career paths outside of clinical and educational settings. This is consistent with Normand and Kohn's (2013) main recommendation: "We suggest that a reasonable alternative approach is for well-trained behavior analysts to acquire skills and credentials in areas in which their behavior-analytic skills would be useful" (p. 112).

The authors of the current article work in applied animal behavior and OBM, and we are often asked for guidance and mentoring to help behavior analysts transition into our domains. We have found that although our areas of practice are starkly different, our advice is similar. Because of the frequency of these requests and the similarity of the guidance we provide, we thought it would behoove us to document our suggestions formally. We intend this advice to be general guidance; details and nuance specific to particular practice areas are not included. We do not believe that our list is exhaustive, nor do we believe it is a guaranteed path to success. Furthermore, we strongly believe that the first and best solution is to obtain graduate-level training and mentorship from a faculty member who already works in the desired practice area. But we recognize this can be difficult because opportunities are limited. Therefore, in this article, we offer four strategies that behavior analysts who are interested in branching out into new areas of practice and developing sufficient competence outside of clinical and educational settings may find helpful.

Our advice is fundamentally aligned with that of LeBlanc et al. (2012), which included contacting the literature both within and outside behavior analysis, contacting relevant professional groups, pursuing retraining and supervision, and identifying professional credentials. Our discussion includes additional suggestions and considerations for those wishing to practice outside of clinical and educational settings. These suggestions are not meant to keep response effort low. On the contrary, we believe that competently delving into new practice areas almost always requires much more response effort than following a known and frequently traveled path.

Learn Behavior Analysis Concepts and Fundamental Skills in Depth

Practitioners who deliver applied behavior analysis (ABA) services to individuals diagnosed with intellectual disabilities

have access to a wealth of resources to inform their practice in the form of manuals, curricula, assessments, books, journal articles, and training. Although they will still need to make daily decisions, they can rely on an abundance of already-developed and researched technologies to assist in structuring and supporting their work. But when you venture outside of the most common practice areas, the resources to support your work become scarce, simply because there are fewer people to create and disseminate them. Therefore, many more daily decisions rely on your fluency in the basic concepts of behavior analysis and your competence in fundamental skills (e.g., operationally defining behavior, developing a measurement system, determining an assessment strategy). Working in less common practice areas will undoubtedly involve a great deal of problem solving without much support. Thus, obtaining high-quality, in-depth training in behavior analysis is essential. Attaining this training can be accomplished in a few ways.

Obtain High-Quality Master's Training

First, you should attend a reputable graduate program with highly qualified faculty. The program should teach students to locate, read, and synthesize research literature on specific topics. The Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI) Accreditation Board accredits graduate training programs in behavior analysis at the master's and doctoral levels. Accreditation standards are rigorous and cover many program aspects, including outcomes (ABAI, 2020a). Accreditation standards and a list of accredited programs are available at abainternational.org. A number of articles recently published in *Behavior Analysis in Practice* have offered additional perspectives on evaluating the quality of graduate training programs (e.g., Carr & Nosik, 2015; Critchfield, 2015; see Dixon, 2015, for an introduction to a series of commentaries on this topic). It is most desirable to work directly with a faculty member who specializes in your desired area of practice and is an active contributor to the literature in that area (Alligood, Anderson, & McGee, 2019; Dixon, Reed, Smith, Belisle, & Jackson, 2015; Sleiman, Matey, & Gravina, 2020; Wilder, Lipschultz, Kelley, Rey, & Enderli, 2015). However, if this is not possible, seek mentorship from faculty with related skills and/or who also work in less common areas of practice. Note that programs with more than a few faculty members are most likely to have a variety of less common practice areas represented. Faculty who have worked in less traditional areas of practice can teach students to familiarize themselves with the literature, population, and setting and develop their skill set. In other words, students can learn to learn about a new topic area.

If your graduate training is complete, you should still contact the literature in your desired area of practice (Carr & Briggs, 2010). Note that much of the literature in less common areas of practice may be found outside of explicitly behavior-

analytic journals. For example, journals relevant to applied animal behavior might include *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* and the *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*. Journals relevant to OBM include the *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, *Safety Science*, and the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. You could also consider taking additional classes, joining a research lab, and finding other ways to enhance your knowledge and fluency in applying behavior analysis in a new setting. You might also consider further graduate training in a discipline related to your desired area of practice. For example, a behavior analyst interested in applied animal behavior might consider disciplines such as applied ethology, behavioral ecology, or wildlife conservation, and a behavior analyst interested in OBM might choose public health, business, or human resources. Depending on your career goals, this additional training could be tremendously helpful, allowing you to develop extensive expertise in your chosen area of practice under an expert already working in that field. That person would then, ideally, become your advocate as you take your next career steps.

Doctoral Training

In some cases, it may be valuable for you to earn a PhD. Quality doctoral-level training can further strengthen knowledge in behavioral science. It may be easier to transition into a new practice area if you first have a strong understanding of behavior analysis, and PhD-level training is one way to build that understanding. The research experience garnered from PhD training can hone analytical and other skills associated with learning a content area in depth. Doctoral-level training generally requires more independent work, which is also a common element of working in a new practice area. It may be helpful to talk with professionals working in your desired area of practice about whether a PhD will be valuable given your career goals.

Moving From a Common Practice Area to a Less Common Area by Taking Slow, Planned Steps

Last, you may find it useful first to train and work in a more common practice area to strengthen your behavior-analytic knowledge and skills and then take steps to branch out into a new area. This approach can be accomplished in a stepwise fashion where you only change one element of your practice area at a time. For example, you could work with a new population while still addressing similar problems in similar settings. Then, once you become more familiar with the population, you could move on to addressing new problems. This approach still requires a depth of knowledge in behavior analysis (Table 1).

Find a Mentor or Community of Practice

Applying behavior analysis in a new or less common area of practice is a big responsibility. If you attempt to transition into a new practice area without sufficient training and mentoring, you risk practicing outside of your scope of competence (Brodhead, Quigley, & Wilczynski, 2018), which is a violation of the BACB's ethics code (BACB, 2014). Practicing without the requisite knowledge and skills presents three significant issues. First, the consumers served may not receive the quality services that their time and money warrant, and in some cases, the services may be detrimental to the client. Second, the practice area may acquire a poor reputation because you are not delivering quality services, thus making it difficult for highly qualified individuals to obtain work and limiting growth. Third, a trial-and-error approach to service delivery will likely not yield methods that are in line with current best practices in the area, and may lead to the development of faulty repertoires that perpetuate the aforementioned issues. Therefore, it is essential that you develop sufficient competence (Brodhead et al., 2018).

One way to safeguard your practice is to find an experienced mentor (LeBlanc et al., 2012). Mentors can provide nuanced training and feedback as you practice in a new area, and help you determine when you are competent in the new knowledge or skill area. There are at least four ways to secure mentoring: (a) being hired by an established company, (b) arranging for contracted supervision, (c) volunteering time on projects, and (d) joining a community of practice with experts.

Work for an Established Company

Working for a company already delivering services in the new practice area has many benefits. You can learn from already-established practices, have a community of people to lean on for problem solving, and start with less responsibility that expands as your skill set develops. Also, this type of arrangement may offer more financial security than starting a practice on your own. You may have to begin with an entry-level or loosely related position and then work yourself into a more desirable position. Identifying a professional organization in your desired area of practice can be a good way to start exploring the types of jobs available; these organizations sometimes provide job listings on their websites. Examples of professional organizations in applied animal behavior include the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the Association of Professional Dog Trainers, and the Animal Behavior Society. Examples in OBM include the International Society for Performance Improvement, the American Society of Safety Professionals, and the National Safety Council.

Table 1 Action Steps for Branching Out

General Advice	Action Steps
Learn behavior analysis concepts and fundamental skills in depth.	Explore ABAI-accredited graduate training programs at abainternational.org . Consider additional graduate training in your area of interest. Contact the literature in your desired area of practice.
Find a mentor or community of practice.	Identify professional organizations in your desired practice area. Connect with an ABAI special interest group. Consider volunteer work in your area of interest.
Find a job in the practice area.	Carefully consider how your specific qualifications match the standard job requirements in your chosen area. Obtain employment in your new area of practice as soon as possible. Consult a mentor for guidance.
Be realistic and humble.	Approach new experiences as a learner, not an expert. Look for opportunities to apply component skills. Resist the urge to label and explain behavior-analytic practices a priori.

Contract a Mentor

Paying an expert for supervision or coaching is another way to secure expert support while branching out into a new practice area. The expert could be within behavior analysis, but it can also be beneficial to obtain mentoring from an expert related to the practice area. For example, an individual with training in OBM who wants to branch out into safety could partner with a safety expert to develop effective tools and interventions. Although paying for mentoring may not be ideal for everyone, it is the best way to secure a committed and experienced, long-term coach. When building your career, access to top-quality mentoring and advice from experts in your chosen area of practice is critical. Paying for their time is a wise investment in your future, much like high-quality graduate training. If you find someone to mentor you for free, you may be getting what you pay for. Once you have identified a professional organization in your desired practice area, attending a conference held by that organization is one way to connect with experts in that area. You might also consider connecting with an ABAI special interest group related to your area of interest. These groups cover a wide range of topics, including applied animal behavior; OBM; technology; and health, sports, and fitness (ABAI, 2020b), and they may include members who are themselves experts in your desired area of practice, or who can help you identify experts who might serve as mentors.

Volunteer for a Mentor

If you cannot find work at an established company or obtain a contracted mentor, you could volunteer to help with research or practical projects. This type of experience could allow you to see if the new practice area is a good fit by providing you with exposure without a long-term commitment. Expect your initial involvement to be superficial, but after you have

established your reliability and skill set, it may develop into a more meaningful opportunity. In the long run, it might even result in more interesting and even paid opportunities.

Join a Community of Practice

A community of practice can be described as a group of individuals who work in a similar area and meet regularly to share information, training, experiences, and tools among the group (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The idea is that the group can accelerate individual learning and technologies developed by freely sharing with others. Of course, this requires that some of the members of the group have more advanced training and skills to lead and support others, but it could be a good strategy for finding additional support when entering new practice areas (Busch et al., 2020).

Find a Job in the Practice Area

After gaining foundational training in behavior analysis and making connections with a mentor or community, if you have not yet secured paid work experience in your area of interest, we recommend that you do so as soon as possible. Students and practitioners often lament that they have trouble finding job openings for behavior analysts in new areas of practice. In industries where behavior analysis is not a well-known area of expertise, job descriptions are unlikely to include the phrases *behavior analysis* or *behavior analyst*. This should not be taken as an indication that behavior analysts cannot work in that industry. Instead, you will need to look closely at your specific qualifications and how those qualifications match the standard job requirements in your chosen area (e.g., Eubanks, O'Driscoll, Hayward, Daniels, & Conner, 1990). If you are new to your chosen area of practice, you will probably need to start in an entry-level position to build experience and advance

to other opportunities. For example, a behavior analyst who desires to work in instructional design may start in a specialist position requiring 0–1 years of experience to apply. In our experience, it is common for behavior analysts who quickly demonstrate their value to be promoted to their desired job over time.

Sometimes students interested in practicing outside of clinical and educational settings pursue board certification in behavior analysis as a “backup plan” in case they are unable to find employment in their chosen area. Although we hesitate to discourage students from building their qualifications, a word of caution is in order. In many cases, established positions for a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) pay more than entry-level positions in less common areas of practice. Once you earn certification, these higher paying positions may seem very attractive, but they can ultimately distract you from pursuing your area of interest. Although having a backup plan is wise, the longer you delay accruing experience in a given area, the more difficult it may become to find employment in that area. Accepting an entry-level position in a nontraditional area is a risk to be weighed against the strength of your preference for working in that area. If your preference is strong, the best strategy is to shift focus to the nontraditional area as soon as practicable. A good mentor will help you identify appropriate opportunities and evaluate necessary and desirable qualifications.

Be Realistic and Humble

A strong foundation in behavior analysis is necessary for successfully applying behavior analysis in new settings, but it is not sufficient. When beginning work in a new area of practice, it is important to approach the experience as a learner rather than as an expert. Recognize that individuals who have built careers in this area have also developed proficiency in a range of applicable skills outside behavior analysis. This is the case in any applied setting. To take the field of autism and developmental disabilities as an example, success at designing and facilitating the implementation of effective interventions requires that practitioners learn skills such as communicating with administrators, insurance personnel, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders, as well as navigating the rules of the systems in which those individuals operate.

It can take years to become proficient in a new practice area, particularly given that the required skill building may not begin until after your behavior analysis training is completed. Here are three suggestions for succeeding during this time of learning.

Use Humility

One way that behavior analysts sometimes impede their progress in new settings is by holding themselves out as experts before actually building expertise. Evidence from the field of social psychology shows a pattern called the Dunning–Kruger effect: Individuals who lack expertise in a given area are often unaware of the extent of their deficits (e.g., Dunning, 2011). That is, they are ignorant of their ignorance. In new behavior analysis practice areas, this illusion of expertise can manifest as starting a business without obtaining sufficient training and/or mentoring or moving too quickly without regard for collegial relationships when working within an organization. When practicing in a new setting, you will work with professionals whose training and experience are outside the field of behavior analysis. This circumstance is best viewed as an opportunity to learn from seasoned experts (Friman, 2010; LeFrance, Weiss, Kazemi, Gerenser, & Dobres, 2019). When trying to establish yourself in a new area, your first jobs are to learn all you can and to pair yourself with reinforcers. Hold off on sharing your suggestions until you have made demonstrable progress in those two areas.

Make Yourself Useful

You will build credibility if you are known as someone who pitches in and works hard on things that people in the organization already value, rather than telling them what their priorities should be. While you are doing this, look for opportunities to demonstrate some of your behavior-analytic skills. Just because an organization is not currently using an explicitly behavior-analytic methodology, such as functional analysis, does not mean that behavior-analytic skills cannot be applied. It is helpful to break behavior-analytic work into component skills, such as operationalizing behavior, strategic thinking, and component analyses. Aim to be receptive to opportunities to be involved in different types of work, and look for opportunities to apply these component skills. Demonstrating the value of your skill set also aids in relationship building.

Show It, Then Tell It

As you come across opportunities to use your skills, resist the urge to label and explain behavior-analytic practices a priori. Instead, wait until your colleagues have seen favorable results from a strategy; *then* you can give them a name for it. When talking with colleagues about your ideas for implementing behavior-analytic practices, you will likely be seeking their support in trying practices with which they are unfamiliar. That is the wrong time to introduce and explain new terminology (Diller, Salters-Pedneault, & Gallagher, 2014). In good instructional design, concepts are learned through experience

with a series of critical examples and nonexamples (Layng, 2019).

We both enjoy fulfilling careers specializing in behavior analysis practice outside of clinical and educational settings. We encourage aspiring explorers to pursue their interests in new areas of practice. Although circumstances will vary, we hope that the suggestions conveyed here will help you chart a course to success. In our experience, the fulfilling destinations have made the time, effort, and sacrifice of the journey worthwhile.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

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