

# PBIS Is (Not) Behavior Analysis: a Response to Horner and Sugai (2015)

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**Abstract** I comment on Horner’s and Sugai’s article regarding the lessons learned from implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS)—that is, the things to consider when attempting to extend other works in behavior analysis to the likes of mainstream society. In adopting a critical eye toward the PBIS model, I comment first on the need for dissemination of behavioral principles to a public audience, and then outline the suggestions made by the authors for enhancing acceptance across disciplines. I clarify the definition of PBIS presented by the authors, and summarize the benefits and drawbacks associated with the conceptual argument surrounding the contention that PBIS is a behavior analytic approach to system-wide change, and argue instead for the distinction of elements in the PBIS model and their respective empirical effectiveness. I refer to other works in behavior analysis that are relevant to the current discussion and offer additional considerations for behavior analysts interested in forging ahead with endeavors that aim increase dissemination, particularly those that incorporate a culmination of alternative professional practices.

**Keywords** Applied behavior analysis · Positive behavior support · Prevention · Problem behavior in schools

Recent discussions in behavior analysis center around the conundrum of effective dissemination and adoption of behavioral practices by mainstream (i.e., public) audiences. Since its inception in 2008, *Behavior Analysis in Practice* has sought to incorporate scientific findings from applied settings to inform best practices in the service delivery of behavioral

practitioners (Dixon 2013). In his first editorial as the journal’s current editor, Dixon (2013) highlights the issue of segregation between behavior analysts and other practitioners. He suggests that unification between disciplines may lead the way toward a more “optimal state of affairs.” Similar ideas have been voiced in other behavioral volumes.

For instance, in *The Behavior Analyst* special issue on publishing outside of the box (Friman 2014), contributors informed academics and practitioners alike of the diligence required in effectively promoting our science while maintaining the characteristic scientific rigor and high standards of the field. Normand (2014) recounts the expansion of behavior analysis from traditional operant research published in the *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior (JEAB)* to the formation of the Association for Behavior Analysis (ABA), now an international organization (ABAI). He highlights our failure as a field to convince the general public of the utility of the science and suggests that our current metaphorical practices of “playing in our own sandbox,” “preaching to the choir,” and “building our ghetto,” have a long-lasting downstream impact not recognized by academics that must be addressed if we expect growth and dissemination. If not, we must learn to live with our low impact factors for behavioral journals, limited opportunities for learning from other fields, and ultimately, our segregation from other disciplines.

A central theme across these and other articles addressing this issue is the need for collaboration between disciplines and a shift in the language used to describe our science (Schlinger 2014). In other words, we need to learn to play nice with others, AND communicate in plain English when we wish to engage the interests of others. In doing so, we may begin to more regularly offer society acceptable and evidence-based strategies for tackling issues of social significance. In turn, society may oblige our efforts and actually utilize our strategies—a win for both teams.

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In the current article, Horner and Sugai advance the efforts of dissemination by presenting an example in which public acceptance and adoption are flourishing. As proponents of the behavioral tradition, the authors have published their ideas in a wide range of behavioral and nonbehavioral volumes, and speak to an array of audiences (e.g., parents, school administrators, practitioners). Their work focuses on the basic principles underlying a now commonly adopted methodology for preventing and improving social and behavioral outcomes in one of the largest and potentially most delicate institutions in the USA: public education.

A package intervention—born from basic practices in behavior analysis, wed with a culmination of other disciplines and spread through adoption in the mainstream education system—school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is advancing as a best-practice model of prevention for undesirable behavior and maintenance of academic improvements. Horner and Sugai review the PBIS literature to examine the roots of the model, and then summarize various lessons learned through research and direct implementation over the past 20 years.

When considering foundational components of PBIS, it is easy to see how PBIS and ABA are conceptually cut from the same cloth. For instance, PBIS utilizes a least-to-most, progressively intensive and individualized, three-tier approach to system-wide change. It incorporates continual monitoring of individual progress, evidence-based behavioral interventions (e.g., positive reinforcement for appropriate social and academic performance, and contingent consequences for engagement in maladaptive behaviors), and ongoing evaluation of effectiveness. These practices are foundational to a wide range of behavioral packages currently implemented within organizations and homes across the globe.

The authors point out that other ABA practices are less often recognized and adopted by public constituents than is PBIS. They ask readers to consider the variables responsible for widespread adoption, in hopes to better equip the behavior analysts of the future with effective strategies for promoting the science. To summarize, their considerations include (1) offering and training a variety of empirical strategies that establish core features, from which implementers may choose to fit their social climate; (2) incorporating individuals across all levels of the organization who may affect the likelihood of positive outcomes and/or continued adoption; (3) developing efficient data systems that inform decisions to continue or terminate implementation; and (4) attending to the objectives and expectations for change through system-wide adoption and team-based implementation.

Horner and Sugai drive the idea that multiple strategies should be taught and utilized by those within the system as the implementer sees fit and as cultural variables will allow. This promotes ABA as a flexible, generic, multicomponent intervention, effective even in the hands of a previously

novice implementer. This assertion is one that Skinner would likely approve. The authors also promote a team-based approach to intervention, adopting the multilevel systems analysis often utilized in organizational behavior management to change the behavior of large groups. Together, these considerations indeed may lead to increased awareness of the need for behavioral specialists within school districts, and subsequent adoption and acceptance by nonbehavioral practitioners that form the team of implementers.

Indeed, the objectives speak to the complex nature of gaining acceptability within large groups. The authors describe the various components of ABA that should be adopted by any practitioner in training interventions, and summarize them nicely in their concluding remarks. They borrow from decades of marketing literature in consumer psychology and present a need for behavior analysts to “brand” their features and strategies; a tactic known to establish a clear and recognizable image for consumers to allow for greater trust and customer loyalty to the brand.

While the authors emphasize the elements of implementation that they believe to have been most influential in leading to the large-scale adoption of PBIS, it should be noted that a crucial consideration of differentiating PBIS as a whole from its behavioral subcomponents in its definition and implementation might have gone overlooked. In doing so, this may pose a potential for difficulty by practitioners and consumers attempting to differentiate between the distinct approaches within the model. To summarize Horner and Sugai’s definition, PBIS is an applied example of behavioral theory, practiced on a large-scale, which includes other elements not traditionally validated as examples of ABA. Examples listed by the authors include person centered planning, wrap-around mental health supports, self-determination, prevention science, and implementation science. Given this, the PBIS model may not in fact be an example of behavioral theory, but rather, only a portion of the components of PBIS model meet criteria.

Within the boundaries of our own field, certain professionals argue that PBIS *is* ABA, while others argue against the contention altogether. Horner and Sugai present a balanced summary of professional input from the field regarding the distinction between the two; however, the authors are missing the emphasis on the *other* components of PBIS that may create issues of conflation between PBIS and ABA, and therefore, may increase the potential for conflict in moving forward with promoting our science through the collaboration with other disciplines. The branding of applied behavior analysis by referring to it as anything other than wholly ABA may serve to increase interest, but equally conflate ABA-specific and non-ABA specific models, or elements of such models. Evidence of conflation may be seen in the arguments that PBIS is, in fact, ABA, when various elements stem from theories not derived from the ABA literature (e.g., those elements mentioned previously in question by authors in the field). In their

analysis, some of the traditional arguments surrounding the history of ABA and PBIS are presented, but are abbreviated in what seems an attempt to reduce redundancy with past publications (e.g., Anderson and Kincaid 2005). I argue these arguments they may be most important in considering the popularity and acceptability of PBIS, in that the essential elements may in fact be those derived from traditional psychological theories.

Implementers involved in PBIS must heed caution in overstating the empirical basis upon which the PBIS package that they form is framed. While the fundamental ABA principles incorporated into the PBIS model are empirically validated and accepted as effective interventions, when implemented and incorporating the non-ABA-specific elements, the resulting PBIS package interventions are not. With no component analysis to support all elements of the model, it is impossible to determine the necessary relevant factors that lead to robust outcomes demonstrated in the data discussed by the authors. Further, it is likely that the readers and nonbehavioral constituents may confuse the nonempirically validated components of PBIS as empirically validated—a scientific misnomer that may lead to even greater issue than clarity in definition.

Horner and Sugai seem to adopt the notion that all functional elements of PBIS stem from behavioral theory and list the various practices responsible for a debate ensuing in the literature regarding the actual contribution of behavior analysis over other elements of the PBIS framework (see Anderson and Kincaid (2005) and Weiss et al. (2010) for comprehensive analyses of these arguments). Regardless of contributing effects, behavior analysts must decide which position to take in asserting the behavior analytic role in PBIS. It would be negligent to assume that behavior analysts can take full credit for the approach, yet a disservice to the field to negate the contributions altogether. Given the combination of interventions involved in PBIS, novice implementers may likely conflate the terms and boundaries of each element; thereby, erroneously claiming effectiveness where none is due, and further, declaring competency in implementing ABA, when speaking only on behalf of any one component of PBIS in which they received training.

It is not uncommon for behavior analysts to join forces or to borrow momentum created in other arenas to be heard and to gain acceptance among the nonbehavioral constituents and consumers. For example, organizational behavior management provides a suitable behavioral compliment to the theories and methods utilized in the more mature, industrial/organizational psychology. Furthermore, approaches within clinical behavior analysis (e.g., cognitive behavior therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy) stem from the early works in traditional clinical and cognitive psychologies. PBIS is just another example of the marriage between traditions to accomplish some greater outcome. The earliest PBIS model

was derived from fundamental ideas within behavior analysis and has been expanded to incorporate other forms of professional practice, already accepted and adopted within the educational system, and as Horner and Sugai point out, with prevailing efficiency and momentum.

In addition to the argument of conflation, the warnings associated with “not following” Horner and Sugai’s lessons are hinted at, but not blatantly stated or supported with evidence or examples of who to contact and how to get started with the adoption movement. As previously mentioned, publishing outside of the field may be a powerful way to influence the world and seek feedback from administrators and professionals in other disciplines (Friman 2014). The current paper fails to assert the recommendation of what to publish (and where to publish) demonstrations of mainstream relevance that may lead to future success in gaining acceptance. Considering the potential for PBIS audience to misinterpret the facts and facets of PBIS compared to ABA, it is important that those conveying the research in each arena present it in plain terms and with caution for misinterpretation. To do so would require what Reed (2014) suggests: advanced knowledge of the alternative fields and understanding of how the methods are applied. In this way, we may begin to formulate a convincing argument of the true effectiveness of ABA within the PBIS model.

## Conclusion

PBIS has demonstrated success in ways that behavior analysts may so desire for our field. Horner and Sugai present a functional approach to expanding the scope of behavioral science for mainstream adoption. While the considerations may indeed catalyze our efforts to connect with the public, it was my intent to draw attention to the need for clarification for what exactly in the PBIS model our field may be held accountable, and to what degree we can speak to the empirical basis of the package as a whole versus the empirically validated components of PBIS.

It is my belief that without extending the discussion to warn readers of the unintended consequences of overlooking finer details of distinction within the model, we may end up conflating the terms, and as a result, have inexperienced and less-knowledgeable implementers overstating competencies to their benefit and the field’s detriment. Rather than brand our techniques as PBIS sub-strategies, the discussion of distinction should be had and shared with the general public in a way that is consumable.

As Schlinger (2014) highlights, there exist a dynamic range of outlets that are relevant for our science. He asserts that speaking the same language as those we wish to influence is important in being heard. Becoming involved in the happenings within the school district are important, and offering

advice and critiques based on practical logic and practical science can get our foot in the door in gaining acceptability. He states, “We cannot change their histories, we can set the occasion for new and different ways of thinking about behavior. But we cannot have these effects and fortuitous dividends if we do not venture outside of our box to talk to them” (p. 80). In this, I commend the authors for their efforts, and for this, I heed caution in the same endeavors.

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