

Ten Rules for Discussing Behavior Analysis

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Abstract Mischaracterizations of behavior analysis are someone's behavior, and they should be approached in exactly the same way that behavior analysts approach behavior that is deemed curious, troubling, or self-injurious.

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When people who are not behavior analysts speak of matters that are the province of behavior analysis, they often botch the job. In reacting to such instances, a behavior analyst must first and foremost *be a behavior analyst*. Although a great deal is involved in this—otherwise, people might describe us more accurately—a lot can be captured in a few maxims that apply nicely to the problem of mischaracterizations.

1. The organism is always right. People who speak inaccurately about behavior analysis have not learned what behavior analysis is and have learned a lot that is contrary to behavior analysis. Given this history, they can no more speak accurately about behavior analysis than they can sing opera, skate a triple Salchow, or perform any other act that demands a specialized learning history.
2. Behavior is not personal. Mischaracterizations are instances of behavior—neither the product of “intention” nor a matter of “personal responsibility” (e.g., Skinner 1972). The instant a mischaracterization harnesses what Sutherland (2009) calls “your inner primate” (which deals with undesired behavior through aggression and dominance), you have lost the battle. People do not spend time with or accept assistance from someone who is on the attack.

3. Behavior has a function. Behavior is easiest to change when you know what is controlling it. For any given speaker, you need to understand the historical and current environmental influences that led to a botched description of behavior analysis. If you can functionally analyze the behavior of an individual exhibiting clinically disordered behavior, you can do this in the comparatively simple case of a writer, a parent, a teacher, or a colleague.
4. Plan your own behavior to support behavior change. Effective clinicians play a role in which everyday repertoires are replaced by repertoires that promote client success. In talking with non-behavior analysts, *your* behavior should be *what the other person needs* to better understand. For example, a colleague of mine speaks to parents about “giving children reasons to make good decisions” (*not* how this colleague normally talks about concurrent operants). This is a possible example of what Steve Hayes calls “mid-level concepts,” that is, a language that is selected because it can translate readily into both technical “behaviorese” and the lay dialect (Villardaga et al. 2009).
5. Behavior changes gradually. The idea that a single rebuttal of a mischaracterization will make everything right is folly. It took you a long time to learn how to speak accurately about behavior analysis. Why would it be different for any other speaker?
6. Pick your battles. Some speakers get *a lot* wrong about behavior analysis. Target one problem at a time and start with something that is relatively easy to change. Also, your functional analysis will reveal what changes can realistically be made. You do not have enough access to some speakers or enough control over their environments to create change.
7. It is easier to prevent than to rectify problem behavior. Ongoing problem behavior is strongly controlled by past

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and current environments. It is much easier to be proactive and build desirable repertoires before there is a problem. If you wait around for mischaracterizations of behavior analysis to arise, two things are certain: they will, and you will spend all your time putting out fires. In my view, mischaracterizations occur so often because behavior analysts spend too much time speaking to each other and not enough time proactively disseminating (e.g., Critchfield 2010).

8. Be evidence based. A growing scientific literature on dissemination describes how new audiences come to embrace an innovation (surely behavior analysis counts as an innovation!). For example, Rogers (2003) notes that innovations are likely to be accepted if they are introduced.
 - As a means of solving problems that people already regard as pressing. Linking behavior change to naturally occurring reinforcers is more effective than simply pointing out that an offending speaker has erred.
 - In ways that are compatible with the existing sociocultural system. For most speakers, the existing sociocultural system is mentalistic. Thus, for instance, when Critchfield and Twyman (2014) presented stimulus equivalence to cognitively oriented educational psychologists, they related stimulus classes to semantic networks and other familiar cognitive concepts.
9. Skills become more fluent with practice. Dissemination is a skill. In a perfect world, every behavior analysis would devote part of each day to teaching the uninitiated about behavior. If that happened, we would all get very good at the task and a lot of people “out there” would know how to speak more accurately about our discipline, thereby greatly reducing the need to address mischaracterizations.

10. If the first nine rules have registered at all, this last one counts more as summary than extension. Among my first lessons as a novice college instructor was that a learner’s failure to learn always signals a teacher’s failure to teach (e.g., Keller 1968). If applied behavior analysis is the sacred mission that so many of its adherents believe it is, then the mission extends far beyond using behavior analysis to solve specific clinical problems. We should also be teaching the world about behavior analysis (giving away the science, as Steve Hayes is fond of saying) and using behavior analysis to teach about it. From this perspective, each time we encounter a mischaracterization of our discipline, we see our own dissemination failures writ large—or in the immortal words of the comic strip character Pogo: “We have met the enemy and he is us” (Kelly 1972).

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