



LEARNING KEYSTONES ETHICS SERIES

Part I

Is ABA Ethical?



PART I IS ABA ETHICAL

When used for treatment of
Autism and Developmental
Disorders

- Ableist
- Emphasis on Assimilation
- Cure Autism
- Cruel - Torture
- Creates “Robots”
- Causes PTSD

Reputation & Criticism of ABA

- **Learned helplessness**
- **Food/reward-obsessed**
- **Magnified vulnerabilities to sexual and physical abuse**
- **Decreased intrinsic motivation**
- **Anxiety**
- **Suppressed autonomy**
- **Prompt dependency**
- **Adult reliance**

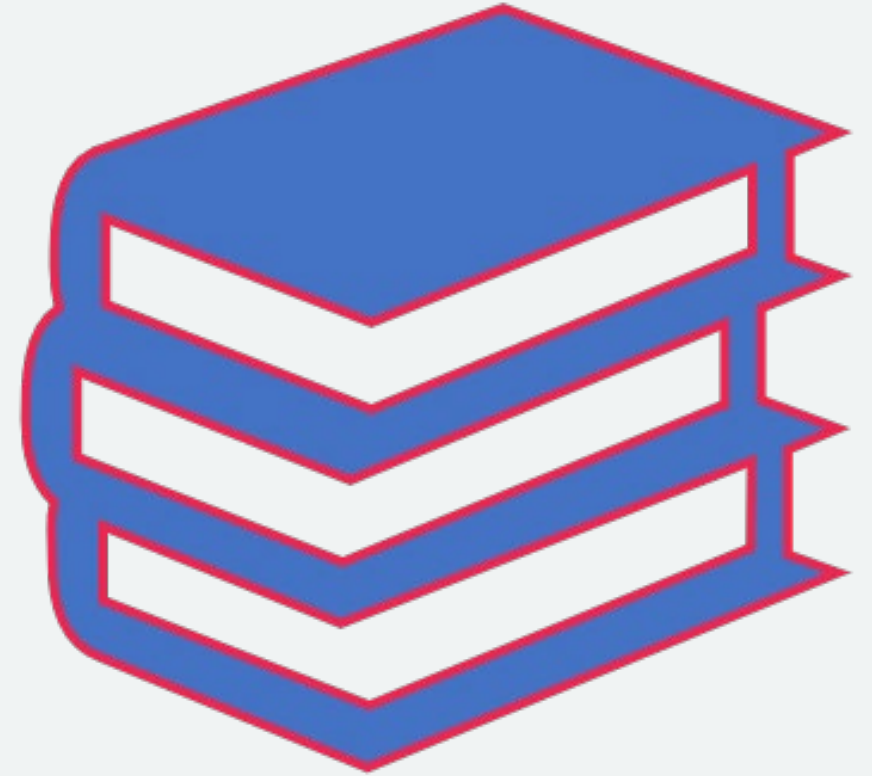
Reputation & Criticism of ABA

ARE THE CRITICS
RIGHT?



The Critics Are Wrong!

- ABA Works
- Anecdotal evidence of improvement in individuals' lives.
- 60+ years of research



Case Study in the misrepresentation of ABA in Autism:

“The opportunity cost of not using ABA..is that their children will be delayed in achieving their full potential or never achieve it at all. As a result, their children will need more supportive services and institutionalization later into their lives and perhaps for the rest of their lives at significant personal and social costs to them, and financial costs to us all.”

Literature



DO THE CRITICS HAVE A POINT?

Advances in Autism

Evidence of increased PTSD symptoms in autistics exposed to ABA

“Autistic respondents exposed to ABA were 1.86 times more likely to meet PTSD diagnostic criteria”

Literature

Cogent Psychology 2019

How much compliance is too much compliance: Is long-term ABA therapy abuse?

“ABA ..treatment essentially violates their autonomy, does them direct harm and is unjust to one group of people.”

“This approach to treating typical clients would never pass.”

Literature

Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal – Jan 2020

Ethical Concerns with Applied Behavior Analysis for Autism Spectrum “Disorder”

“Autistic children should not be treated with (the dominant species of) ABA, as such treatment essentially violates their autonomy, and at least contingently it does them direct harm and is unjust to one group of people.”

Literature



DO THE CRITICS HAVE A POINT?

ABA'S HISTORICAL RECORD



Lovaas & Rekers

- 1974 Behavior Treatment of Deviant Sex-Role behaviors in Male Child
- 1973 Removed disorder of “Homosexuality”
- 2018 Removed disorder of “transsexualism”
- Conversion Therapy on a Minor
- 2021 Outlawed in 20 states

Normal

- Target Behavior based on Cultural Norms
- Cultural Norms always in Flux
- Live in a Multicultural World
- Who gets to decide what is “normal”
- “Abnormal” Causes immense Suffering
- 2018 Report 42% attempted Suicide
- 1 Accepting Adult 40% Less Likely

World Changes

- In 1974 Lovaas and Rekers prioritized “fitting in”
- In 2021 focus on wellbeing
- Do we do better at choosing wellbeing over “fitting in”
- Is stigma a reason for behavior change?



SOCIALLY SIGNIFICANT



Social Significant

- Socially Significant = Acting “Normal”
- Part of the 7 Dimensions – Applied
- Socially Valid – “Meaningful change that Maintains over time”
- Meaningful = Individual and society
- Who Decides What is Meaningful?
- Parents & Clinicians Usually Decide

Social Significant

**4.02 Involving Clients in Planning & Consent –
“Behavior analysts involve the client in the
planning of and consent for behavior-change
programs”**

Social Significant

- **Do We Ask the Client if Skill is Meaningful?**
- **Communication is a Barrier**
- **Adults on Spectrum Providing Different Point of View**
- **Neurodiversity**

DOES EMPIRICISM
EXCLUDE
EMOTION?





LEARNING
KEYSTONES



SCIENCE
OR WELLBEING

WE ONLY MEASURE
BEHAVIOR WE CAN
OBSERVE!!!!!!



SCIENCE OR WELLBEING

- Cannot observe Private Behavior & Events
- Often Disregard it
- Create Interventions as if they don't exist

The Behavior Analyst

Behaviorism, Private Events, and the Molar View of Behavior (Baum 2011)

“Private events are not *useful* in a science of behavior, and, far from being a key defining aspect of radical behaviorism, private events constitute an unnecessary distraction.”

Literature

SCIENCE OR WELLBEING

- Cannot observe Private Behavior & Events
- Often Disregard it
- Create Interventions as if they don't exist
- Don't consider that we may be unintentionally reinforcing or punishing private events (emotions, biases, etc)

EXAMPLE: COMPLIANCE TRAINING

- **Problem Behavior: Non-compliance**
- **Operational Definition: Following an adult demand, any behavior that is not the behavior requested by the adult**
- **Not a Behavior**
- **Doesn't meet the Dead Person's Test**

EXAMPLE: COMPLIANCE TRAINING

- Sd – Demand
- Bx – Behavior Requested
- R+ - praise, candy, etc.
- No contact with natural Sd or the Natural Reinforcer.

EXAMPLE: COMPLIANCE TRAINING

- Sd – Demand
- Bx – Anything but the Bx requested
- Consequence – Escape extinction

ESCAPE EXTINCTION

- Holding in Place
- Hand over hand
- Physical manipulation
- Adult is adding something to the Environment
- Behavior decreases
- Positive Punishment

WHAT WAS LEARNED & EXPERIENCED

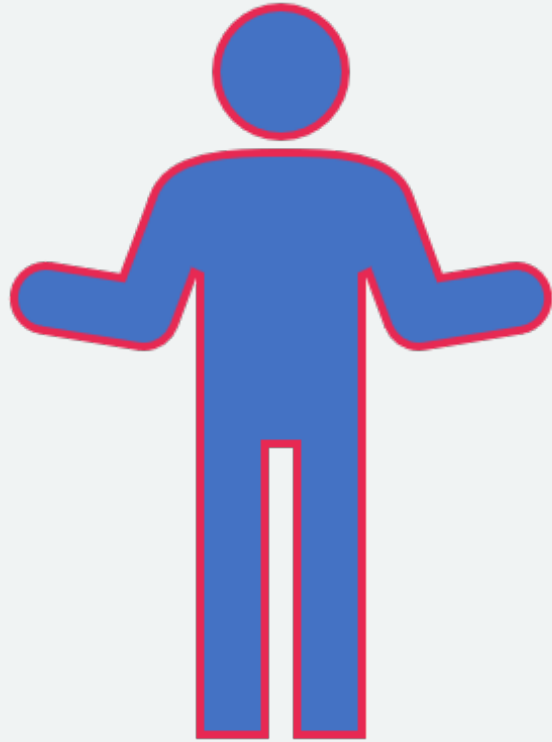
- Complying means I get something good
- Failure to comply results in removal of control over my body
- Failure to comply will provide attention
- Failure to comply will result in something aversive

WHAT WAS LEARNED & EXPERIENCED

- I do not have control over my own body
- If an adult tells me to do something, I must do it
- I'm helpless to alter the conditions when an adult tells me what to do

WHAT WAS NOT LEARNED OR EXPERIENCED

- Why the behavior was needed
- No contact with natural Sd
- No contact with conditions that would condition natural motivation
- No contact with natural reinforcers

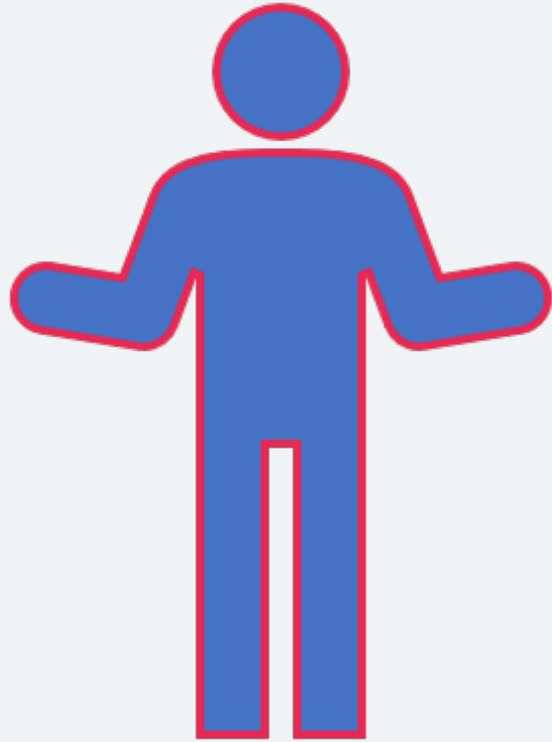


Is this Ethical?

Got Compliance

Personal wants don't matter

Taught Helplessness



Is this Ethical?

Decision making is not necessary and is discouraged

Vulnerable to demands that are dangerous

Not required to engage with the environment



DO THE CRITICS HAVE A POINT?



BASED ON
HISTORY...YES!

What Now?

Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal – Jan 2020

Ethical Concerns with Applied Behavior Analysis for Autism Spectrum “Disorder”

“It would be valuable to develop and implement new measures for the success of ABA that focus on individual well-being rather than markers of functionality within a given social structure.

And from a social perspective, we would do well to structure our society in such a way that people who see the world differently can fit in without having to either change who they are or act like someone they’re not.”

Literature

Changes

- External and Private Behavior
- Fade Reinforcers to the Natural Reinforcer
- Set criteria that alerts us to unintended side effects of reinforcement
- Reinforce functional communication by honoring it

Changes

- Teach the Natural Sd
- Teach decision making and choices
- Evaluate use of Extinction
- Use all our tools

Changes

- Set Goals That Measure Wellbeing
- Collaborate With Your Client
- Know, understand, and set aside your own custom and cultures

Perspective Changes

- Embrace differences
- Client is not the problem
- Their challenges are the problem
- Work with them, not against them
- Goal is help them into the person they want to be

INSTEAD OF
CHANGING
OUR KIDS TO
FIT THE
WORLD...



WORK TO
CHANGE THE
WORLD SO
EVERYONE
FITS!



Part II

Implementing an Ethical ABA Program

Compliance vs. Cooperation