Organizational Behavior Management: a supplement and alternative to traditional areas of work in the analysis of behavior

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to present to a community of behavior specialists, an overview of the subdiscipline of Organizational Behavior Management (OBM) in three aspects. First, OBM is a sub-branch of the larger field of Applied Behavior Analysis. It also has two other aspects: it can complement the traditional set of skills useful to behavior analysts or be one of the alternative careers for them.

Views: Behavior specialists predominantly, and especially in Poland, teach populations with special needs. Whether this is in special education, social assistance or select areas of health care, with young children with autism or adults with intellectual disability, this is where most behavior analysts work. At the same time, they often need to skillfully cooperate in teams, sometimes manage them or instruct people other than those with whom they are usually in contact, such as new team members, parents, and other specialists. OBM can be seen as a supplementary background that answers these needs. It is also a possible alternative career path, with a distinct client base and flagship journal, as well as specific procedures in behavior analysis, experts in the field and specialisms.

Conclusions: Different client populations, variations in instruction techniques and knowledge of response generalization all point to that conclusion that traditional behavior analysts might be largely at a disadvantage in the area covered by OBM: that of a management and team leading and training typically developing clients. Behavior analysts require a background in OBM, otherwise they might "reinvent the OBM wheel" or – which is worse – apply their experiences one-to-one with special populations and bring with them harmful assumptions.

Key words: behavior, organizations, Organizational Behavior Management.

INTRODUCTION

While the principles of behavior discovered and utilized on the grounds of behavior analysis are deemed largely universal, behavior analysts tend to work in a very limited number of fields. This can breed particular kinds of problems and neglects the possibility of employment opportunities for behavior specialists in non-traditional areas. Fortunately, there is a sub-branch of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) that can help improve ABA practitioners' competencies and help them branch out.

IS ABA OVERLY ADAPTED TO ITS NICHE?

Unfortunately, there is no reliable data for Poland, but after a closer look at the 2015 Employment Surveys conducted by the Association of Professional Behavior Analysts [1], it can be seen that almost three quarters behavior analysts work with the special needs population, that is to say people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or intellectual disability. If the third biggest category of "education" is added, it is clear that almost nine out of ten behavior analysts are working in these three areas. Changes in the survey questions notwithstanding, it seems there has however been progress since the 2009 survey [2], showing that 83% of behavior analysts' work was focused on helping children with ASD.

Similarly to supply, the demand for behavior specialists is focused around three main categories: health care, educational services and social assistance [3]. It is reasonable to assume that most of these positions are concerned with teaching people with special needs, broadly understood.

This situation should provoke uneasiness in the community. The accepted explanatory metaphor for principles of behavior in general is selectionism [4]. Behavior analysts also seem to be organisms well-adapted to their niche. Unfortunately, perfect adaptation can breed inflexibility and organisms that are not flexible enough to function beyond their niche find themselves faced with its demise.

Another reason for said uneasiness would be the contrast between the claimed universal validity of behavior change principles and the narrow scope of professional practice of ABA specialists. It is known that the mechanisms which govern behavior work largely across species. Their limits and the exceptions to them [5] have also been incorporated, for better or worse, into the corpus of knowledge in behavior analysis. And yet it is often pointed out [6] that the Experimental Analysis of Behavior (EAB) concerns itself with increasingly detailed and tedious research into non-human animals, which produces limited practical knowledge, while ABA has narrowed down its scope, as the surveys show, to special education.

Finally, there is a more practical argument for the concern around the seemingly limited use of behavior analysts' skills: increasing job requirements. Even behavior analysts working in more traditional fields work with people other than just their direct clients.

Being a leader in a therapeutic or a teaching team, instructing caregivers, training new specialists, or even being a part of a team all require a degree of people and managerial skills, as part of many behavior analysts' duties. This fact is even reflected in BCBA certification [7].

THE ROOTS OF OBM

Fortunately, there already exists a branch of ABA that studies managing and training groups of people, and even organizations [8]. It is called Organizational Behavior Management (OBM) [9].

It is said [10] that OBM handbooks traditionally summarize the roots of the subfield. Hence, the interested reader will find several accounts, presenting in detail the history of OBM and Performance Improvement/Performance Technology, especially in terms of the most important papers, books and events – of both the academic and business varieties [8, 11-13]. We can summarize the situation as follows.

In 1961, Aldis [14] proposed a theoretical account of using lab-tested principles of behavior to increase workers' performance. However, OBM also has its precursors in the works of founders of the field of management in general [15].

As Aubrey Daniels, one of the most prominent researchers and practitioners in the field reminisces, the first practical attempts to apply knowledge of behavior in management focused on training staff in a psychia-

tric setting [16]. This was in the late 1960s when he took to training salespeople and later, beginning in the early 1970s, supervisors in the manufacturing industry.

It was in the 1960s, too, that the first papers and books on improving work performance and using teaching machines in business and management were published, and researchers started incorporating systems analysis to behavior analysis [11]. The field functioned initially under various names [15]: operant psychology, Organizational Behavior Modification (formerly OBMod.), Industrial Behavior Modification (IBMod.), Performance Management (PM), Behavior Analysis [16], and finally OBM with its three subspecialties: PM, Behavior-Based Safety, and Behavioral Systems Analysis [9]. As the field matured, 1977 saw the first publication of the official "Journal of Organizational Behavior Management" (JOBM) [13].

OBM is a subdomain of ABA, which has been in existence for over half a century. With that comes research, specialists, and procedures, all of them largely unknown to the traditionally trained community of behavior analysts [10]. The situation is probably even more difficult outside the US, where the activities of the community of behavior analysts is sparse and focused largely on (special) education, health services and social assistance.

This lack of familiarity, coupled with the need for increased professionalization in the areas of leadership and management, might bring behavior analysts to "reinvent the OBM wheel" [10], ignoring decades of research, practical experience and already established procedures. Of course, OBM already came out of the community of human services specialists (special educators included), but that was not the only influence and source for the field, as was briefly pointed out above.

THE DOMAINS AND TOOLS OF OBM

OBM already has a range of technologies and subfields that may add value to the work of behavior analysts in more traditional fields. Behavioral Systems Analysis (BSA) is a broad framework that can help in creating or improving the viability of human services institutions [17]. Seemingly the most conceptually distant method to traditional ABA, it gives new perspective on organizations' mission statements, their architecture, and the processes through which the systems function. Performance management focuses on the performer level of organizations and is an application of strategies and technologies mostly known to behavior analysts working in more traditional fields [18]. The most common OBM interventions operate on the level of the individual performer [9] and would improve the quality of life in many human service institutions: task clarification, goal setting, providing feedback, reinforcement-based motivation and comprehensive training. The third subfield, Behavior-Based Safety (BBS), focuses on promoting safe behaviors and modifying

environments to prevent accidents [9]. Insights and experience coming from BBS research could help behavior specialists working with severe behavioral problems and in vocational training.

To find examples of distinct technologies in OBM, we can reach to the very heart of applied behavior analysis: functional assessment. While it is true that OBM did not develop a tool comparable to Experimental Functional Analysis, it already has its tested descriptive assessment procedures.

The Performance Diagnostic Checklist [19] is a survey that belongs to the long line of tools created to treat organizational problems. There are currently three area-specific version of the PDC [20]: PDC-Human Services [21], PDC-Parent [22] and PDC-Safety [23]. Currently the PDC is the most used assessment tool in OBM. The surveys consist of 20 (PCD, PDC-HS, PDC-Parent) or 31 questions (PDC-Safety), divided between four domains that are identified as possible sources of problems with performance or safety. These domains are, for PDC and PDC-Safety: (1) antecedents and information, (2) equipment and processes, (3) knowledge and skills, (4) consequences, and for PDC-HS and PDC-Parent: (1) training, (2) task clarification and prompting, (3) resources, materials and processes, (4) performance consequences, effort and competition [20]. These tools allow practitioners to identify root causes of problems and – in the case of PDC [24], PDC-HS [25] and PDC-Parent [26] – suggest particular procedures through which to solve them.

PDC is not the only functional assessment technology to have been developed by OBM specialists. "Mainline" ABA practitioners are obviously familiar with ABC analysis. Hence they will definitely find Aubrey Daniels' PIC/NIC Analysis® [27] easy to understand and implement. The tool focuses on analyzing the consequences of performers' actions: whether they are positive (reinforcing), immediate and certain (hence: "PIC") or rather negative (punishing), likely to be uncertain and become manifest into the future. Of course the Performance Management model [18] is more robust and consists of antecedent analysis, pinpointing behaviors, goal setting and teaching new behaviors by means of known and tested techniques of behavior analysis.

There are other, older, or less known OBM analytic tools. Vantage analysis [28] is an analytic chart that describes an organization on six levels: (1) philosophical, (2) social, (3) organizational, (4) departmental, (5) individual outcomes, (6) individual activities. The aim is to increase the performance of both the organization itself and individual actors.

Gilbert's Performance Matrix [29] is a complex and comprehensive tool for the diagnosis of performance. It looks at the organization on the (1) philosophical, (2) cultural, (3) institutional, (4) strategic, (5) tactical, and (6) logistics levels. It also sequences individual per-

formance, by analyzing behavioral and environmental aspects of "information", "response" and "motivation" and creating a matrix of another six fields: (1) data, (2) knowledge, (3) instruments, (4) capacity, (5) incentives, and (6) motives.

At least some of the above tools share a perspective with BSA, which expands behavior-analytic optics [30]. BSA can feel very alien to ABA specialists working only in the usual domains, but it is a whole branch of OBM, incorporating systemic thinking. It considers three levels of organization: (1) the total performance system, (2) processes of work, and (3) individual performer. The organization is seen as a system: it is a complex, adaptive whole, working in its environment and dependent on it. BSA also has roots in first programmed and applied learning labs, as previously mentioned. OBM has a broad range of diagnostic tools that enable practitioners to analyze different areas of organizational behavior: from individual performer, through the processes along which the work is being done, to the very structure of the organization and its broad environment.

There are also procedures which are very well-known to ABA practitioners, especially those working in education. Yet they will not be found indexed in major handbooks. These would be goal setting and task clarification – both being, as mentioned before, among the most common interventions implemented by OBM specialists [9]. And even though ABA specialists working in the usual fields routinely set goals for their students, patients, or clients, and need to state the task they present clearly, these skills do not necessarily reach the level of generalizability to be used properly in managerial roles.

The OBM technologies can address the challenges the practitioners working in traditional behavioral fields already face and will, probably, face more often. The high turnover of staff, occupational burnout, shortage of qualified workers and reliability of training could all be improved using OBM skills and knowledge. On a more general level, it is possible to diagnose and address problems with organizations themselves that might be ignored by the traditional approach, which is more focused on individual performance. Is the workflow efficiently organized in the agency? Does the institution have a mission that is known and clear to all? Does the team know what resources they need to perform their work? Is the result provided by instruction the one expected by the environment? Answers to these questions can be provided by the OBM approach and improve the functioning of behavioral agencies and teams.

THE OPPORTUNITY TO BRANCH OUT

However, OBM does not merely supplement more traditional ABA knowledge, skills, and experience: it can be a career choice for behavioral specialists [31], one that is

an alternative to working in education, with persons with intellectual disability or ASD. With the success of the literature on habit formation and management [32-34], the basic understanding of human behavior has re-entered popular culture, especially among business people and those concerned with personal development. The success of "behavioral insights" (or cognitively understood behavioral economics) [35] brings behavior back into perspective in terms of public policies and decision-making. This, and decades of OBM research and practice, create new opportunities for behavior specialists, outside the traditional career roles. Performance management, seen as "ABA applied in business", seems the best way to enter the new field.

THE CHALLENGES

But whether OBM is treated as a supplement or an alternative to a more traditional ABA career, two groups of problems for ABA specialists in OBM-specific roles emerge. One is a lack of established knowledge or the proper generalization of already acquired skills. Fortunately, there are sources to guide practitioners in branching out from mainline jobs [36]. There are also, if still moderately rare, opportunities for supervision and the gaining of experience in OBM. There are handbooks, too, both dedicated entirely to OBM or one of its branches [18, 37-39], and more general ones containing informative chapters introducing OBM and its branches, problems, techniques [40-42]. Interested readers can browse the issues of "Journal of Organizational Behavior Management", and can join the OBM Network. There definitely are means to familiarize yourself with names, titles, subjects, and techniques.

OBM knowledge can help mainline ABA practitioners, as the aforementioned techniques exemplify. It can provide means of functional assessment of performance, setting behavioral goals for typically developing adults (i.e., employees, team members) and giving them clearly stated tasks, to name just a handful of things. ABA practitioners can bring more numbers to the field of OBM; and with bigger numbers come more research, new ideas, and the faster development of techniques.

Another problem is overgeneralization, presenting itself as harmful assumptions, stemming from working with populations with special needs. First, working with special populations may be seen as a "mission" or a "calling". An ABA practitioner might either apply that perspective in clinical work environments or even generalize it to include all OBM settings. This may lead them to ignoring toxic or hostile work environments and to neglecting the simple fact that workers need adequate tools and resources to do their jobs properly. It is broadly understood in OBM that "If you pit a good performer against a bad system, the system will win almost every time" [43]. That means no "calling" or "mission" can replace proper working conditions. Also, neither of those is a behavioral term, rather they are part of an unscientific heritage of pedagogical sciences and vague descriptors for private behaviors in some careers.

Another dangerous assumption is that attention is always reinforcing. Many students are attention-deprived in school settings. Many engage in attention-seeking behaviors. This may lead practitioners experienced in those fields to overestimate the role of attention as a reinforcer in OBM-specific settings. Apart from that, ABA practitioners should always prove that particular stimulus-change has, in each situation, a reinforcing function, and not assume it.

All these difficulties can be quite easily overcome and OBM can be a source of invaluable skills to ABA practitioners in their less typical roles. It can also serve as an alternative career path. What is needed is broader knowledge of OBM among the community of behavior analysts and an increase in the provision of training in both theory and practice. Both traditional ABA careers and OBM can benefit from this process and increase in value.

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