A Behavioral Systems Approach to Ethics Training and Supervision

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Background

• Based on my new book, *Practical Ethics for Effective Treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorder*

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Driven By Need

• In all of my work, I try to model an analytical process for dealing with the complexities of ethics and behavior analysis.

• My goal is to demonstrate a new way of thinking, because currently available resources
  • fail to appreciate the complex nature of ethics
  • are too situation-specific and don’t translate to practice where YOU may need them
  • focus on **what not to do**, instead of **what to do**
  • rely heavily on memorizing the BACB Code
  • … have a tendency to be boring
Ethics Defined

• “The emission of behavior in compliance/coordination with the verbally stated rules and behavior-analytic cultural practices guiding practitioner behavior that are espoused by the BACB Code.” (Brodhead, Quigley, & Cox, 2018)

• We are concerned, primarily, with following the BACB Code
Ethics are Important

- Many of us provide behavioral services to some population of individuals
  - If not, you currently, or may one day, provide supervision to those who do
- Sometimes, our oversight of professional and/or ethical behavior may go by the wayside
  - Especially since time spent promoting these skills may not translate to billable hours
- However, ethical and professional behaviors should not be ignored
Unethical Behavior

- Unethical behavior may result in
  - 1) loss and/or harm to consumers
  - 2) damage to the company’s reputation
  - 3) litigation
  - 4) harm to the field of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)
Behaving Ethically

• Most of us know what we need to do
  • Very few people wake up in the morning and say, “I’m going to do wrong today”
• The difficulty lies in translating our guidelines into behaviors that produce desired outcomes in practice
• May occur for a few reasons
  • Training may rely heavily on teaching memorization of the code and case studies that may or may not be relevant to practice
  • Difficulty establishing and maintaining situation-specific behavior that meets standards set by the BACB
Purpose of Presentation

• To demonstrate how organizations may use readily available tools to inform systems of ethics training and supervision that meet BACB guidelines and the organization’s own needs
  • 1) Describe a conceptual process for developing systems of ethical and professional behavior
  • 2) Provide example a basic example of behavioral systems analysis
Behavioral Systems

• Behavioral systems may be the answer we are looking for
• What is a system?
  • “An organized, integrated unified set of components, accomplishing a particular set of ultimate goals or objectives” (Malott & Garcia, 1987)
• Behavioral systems allow for the standardization of processes and policy that occasion desirable employee behavior
• Systems are purposeful, not random
• Additional reading:
  • Sigurdsson & McGee (2015)
  • Diener, McGee, & Miguel (2009)
Behavioral Systems

- A well designed system meets the needs of an organization
- **Example:** The goal of a baseball team is to win
  - When the team performs well, they win
  - When they perform poorly, they lose
- **Example:** Organizations aim to act in the best interest of their clients
  - When the organization behaves ethically and professionally, they achieve this goal
  - When the organization is unethical and/or unprofessional, they do not achieve this goal
Example: Discrete Trial Instruction

- “An organized, integrated unified set of components, accomplishing a particular set of ultimate goals or objectives”
- Goal: Systematically provide instructional opportunities
- How is accomplished?
  - Standardization of instructor behaviors
  - Train instructors and provide feedback
  - Observe instructor behavior over time to ensure high treatment integrity
- Discrete trial instruction is a system that must operate smoothly in order for individuals to learn
Example: Functional Analysis

• “An organized, integrated unified set of components, accomplishing a particular set of ultimate goals or objectives”

• Goal: Analyze the environmental variables that may be responsible for the occurrence of problem behavior

• How is this accomplished?
  • Train employees how to identify potential controlling variables
  • Train employees to develop and implement experimental conditions
  • Observe implementation over time to ensure high procedural fidelity

• Functional analysis is a system that must operate smoothly in order for instructors to accurately identify variables responsible for problem behavior
Ethics

• The systems necessary for engaging in ethical behavior are often much less clear
• Examples:
  • Be a good collaborator
  • Avoid multiple relationships
  • Operate within your own scope of competence
  • Provide appropriate supervision
  • Act in the best interest of your clients
• When people behave unethically, we often blame them for their own actions
  • Victim blaming: saying the victim of the problem is the cause of the problem
The organism is always right.
The organization is responsible for employee behavior, because the organization has control over the environment.

*Technically, organisms behave, and organizations do not.*
Behavioral Systems

- In a clinical organization, systems of ethical training and supervision must be established
  - to meet the needs of the organization
  - to comply with the BACB Code of Ethics
  - to best meet the needs of its clients
  - as an antecedent strategy to promote appropriate behavior
  - as an antecedent strategy to prevent misconduct
- The 6 Steps of Behavior Systems Analysis provides a straight-forward tool for making changes and meeting goals within an organization
The 6 Steps of Behavior Systems Analysis

• Analyze the natural contingencies
• Specify the performance objectives
• Design the system
• Implement the system
• Evaluate the system
• Revise until you reach performance objectives

• ASDIER: a tool for systems change
Six Steps of BSA

• Analyze the natural contingencies:
  • Is there a need for change?
  • What are the problems we face?

• Specify the performance objectives:
  • What organizational needs have to be met?
  • “…organization will teach, maintain, and monitor behavior that complies with the BACB Code of Ethics.”
Six Steps of BSA

• Design the system:
  • Who will manage the change?
  • Who will take over when it’s finished?
  • Will it be an addition to a job description or require the creation of an entire department?
  • In this case, it’s often helpful to diagram system you want to create.
Final Steps of BSA

• Implement the system:
  • Once it’s designed, execute the plan.

• Evaluate the system:
  • What measures can be used to judge its success?
    • Feedback from consumers.
    • Feedback within the organization.
      • Social validity.
  • Feedback from other health care providers.
  • Feedback from the field of behavior analysis.

• Recycle until you reach the performance objectives:
  • Analyze the data, and make changes accordingly.
  • Most likely, you’ll never get past this phase.
    • There is room for improvement at every level of every organization.
    • There is no perfect machine; there is no perfect system.
The 6 Steps of Behavior Systems Analysis

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• ASDIER: a tool for systems change
Sample System

- The following is an example of BSA applied to an organization
  - Example #1:
    - How an ethical monitoring system may be incorporated into an organization
    - How ethical behavior may be taught and maintained by an organization
  - The purpose of this example is to demonstrate how a system may translate the BACB Code into processes designed to improve employee behavior
    - Processes should inform *what to do* instead of *what not to do*
  - Standardizing processes also increases the probability that employees will make the right choices
    - Reduces judgement that results in errors
Analyze the Environment

- Consider a hypothetical organization that does not have any, or has very limited, systems to teach and maintain ethical behavior
- Behavior change does not occur through osmosis
Specify the Performance Objectives

• The following hypothetical goals may be set:
  • Organizations should provide training in the content area of ethics and professional behavior
  • Organizations should create a culture of openly discussing ethics
  • Employees should engage in ethical behavior

• Note: large organization, but relevant for one at any size
Ethics Coordinator

- The ethics coordinator functions as the resident expert of ethics by
  - Overseeing and monitoring individual and group supervision
  - Developing and revising training materials
  - Attending advanced workshops and presentations on ethical conduct
- Desirable skills:
  - Master’s or Ph.D. in behavior analysis (or similar)
  - Considerable supervision experience
  - Willingness to serve as a reference for the organization
  - Understanding of relevant local, state, and federal laws
  - Advocate for employees
Ethics Training and Supervision

Ethics Coordinator

Training and Supervision

Individual Supervision and Training

Group Supervision and Training
Individual Supervision and Training

- During weekly meetings, ethics are always a point of discussion
- Supervisor provides feedback on the appropriateness of the individual’s behavior
- Supervisor discusses issues that have happened in the past that may arise again
  - Archive of past incidents
Group Supervision and Training

• Conducted in conjunction with other trainings or as a stand-alone training

• Benefits (Valentino, LeBlanc, & Sellers, 2016)
  • Opportunities for observational learning
  • Peer feedback
  • Modeling and rehearsing positive and productive discussion
  • Developing empathy

• During group training
  • Discuss complex issues
  • Q and A with Ethics Coordinator
Additional Steps of BSA

- Implement the system
- Evaluate the system
  - You can evaluate training and supervision by
    - Administering period tests that contain scenarios with ethical dilemmas
    - Monitoring the number of complaints received from consumers
    - Direct observation of employees
- Revise until you reach performance objectives
Summary

• Designation of a supervisory role, with respect to ethics, may help to ensure employees have access to the best information possible
  • May also help to protect employees
• Purposefully establishing a culture of ethics discussion in individual and large group supervision may help to increase the probability of ethical behavior
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