Values and the Scientific Culture of Behavior Analysis

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As scientists and practitioners, behavior analysts must make frequent decisions that affect many lives. Scientific principles have been our guide as we work to promote effective action across a broad spectrum of cultural practices. Yet scientific principles alone may not be sufficient to guide our decision making in cases with potentially conflicting outcomes. In such cases, values function as guides to work through ethical conflicts. We will examine two ethical systems, radical behaviorism and functional contextualism, from which to consider the role of values in behavior analysis, and discuss potential concerns. Finally, we propose philosophical pragmatism, focusing on John Dewey’s notions of community and dialogue, as a tradition that can help behavior analysts to integrate talk about values and scientific practices in ethical decision making.

Key words: functional contextualism, naturalistic ethics, pragmatism, radical behaviorism, values

As scientists and practitioners, behavior analysts must make frequent decisions that affect others. Implicit in our practices are numerous assumptions about the welfare of those we serve and how to best ensure it. Our scientific tradition has yielded a powerful behavioral technology, and our fields of application are ever expanding. In this tradition, scientific principles have been our guide to best practice. Yet scientific principles alone may not be sufficient to guide our decisions in situations with potentially conflicting outcomes. In such cases, values function as guides to action and play a key role in helping us work through ethical quandaries. If it is true that operating without a lucid set of guiding principles can bring about grave consequences (Prilleltensky, 1997), then it is in our best interest to have a working understanding of ethical systems that support values-based decision making in behavior-analytic practices. To this end, we will consider two separate philosophical approaches to behavior-analytic science each with its own ethically relevant consequences. From there, we will explore the relationship between values and scientific decision making from the tenets in each case. Specifically, we will examine the reaches and limitations of both systems in guiding decision making within situations involving value conflicts and ethical dilemmas. Finally, we will turn to philosophical pragmatism, focusing on the work of John Dewey, as a tradition that may help behavior analysts build a coherent knowledge and ethical system.

The first philosophical approach we will discuss is B. F. Skinner’s radical behaviorism, which has been the philosophical framework of behavior-analytic science for over 60 years. In his treatment of values, Skinner dismisses the distinctions made by many philosophers between values and facts. In Skinner’s naturalistic ethics, survival emerges as the ulti-
mate value and criterion by which to assess the worth of cultures and individual cultural practices. This leads to a question of practical importance, that is, can Skinner’s ethical system provide a guide to action for scientists, particularly in situations with potentially conflicting outcomes? We review the work of two critics from within our own field who argue that Skinner’s system cannot provide adequate guidelines for resolving ethical problems. Staddon (2004) considers research on smoking to illustrate and argues that Skinner’s system requires science to function beyond its scope, making it unworkable. Zuriff (1987), on the other hand, takes issue with Skinner’s construction of values and concludes that his naturalistic ethics cannot adequately justify survivability as a criterion to resolve ethical problems.

Next we review contextualism, a philosophical framework originally proposed by Pepper (1942) and advanced as a worldview for behavior analysis by Hayes (1993). It is within this philosophical framework that relational frame theory (RFT) (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001) has emerged as an increasingly popular functional analytic account of language and cognitive phenomena. Within contextualism the personal values of the scientist are considered to be the basis for the development of scientific goals. Furthermore, personal values are indefensible and entitled to remain private, and pragmatic truth is established when the scientist’s analytic goals are reached. In conflict situations, therefore, the fulfillment of the scientist’s value-based personal goals is the criterion by which to assess the worth of the scientific practice. The scientist, in turn, is not in principle accountable to others in the scientific or broader community. This explicit stance on the scientist’s accountability is reminiscent of the form of pragmatism developed by Machiavelli (1515/1947). Thus, we will consider some parallels between Machiavellian and contextualistic pragmatism and discuss moral considerations that may limit the adequacy of contextualism in guiding scientific decision making in difficult cases.

The potential confluence of values and scientific decision making can be clearly depicted with a case study from feminist science. One defining aspect of feminist science is its understanding of scientific activity as political activity, and its willingness to explicitly allow political values to help guide choices when faced with conflict situations. We discuss the work of biologists Longino and Doell (1983) to illustrate how values may be used as guides to action in scientific decision making when they are made explicit, and scientific knowing is conceived as participating in a social context. This case study will lead to the final section of the paper in which we consider the philosophical pragmatism of Dewey, whose work we believe is particularly relevant for our behavior-analytic community. For example, Dewey’s approach to relativism and pragmatic truth, his reliance on scientific knowing, and his orienting assumptions about community and the communal aspects of inquiry can enrich our own discussions concerning the criteria we will use to develop ethical principles for ourselves. What we need, we believe, is serious and open dialogue on how we, as a community, can make valued ethical decisions and use them as guides to scientific action.

**RADICAL BEHAVIORISM**

B. F. Skinner’s treatment of values begins with an observation about verbal behavior. Skinner (1971) tells us that “What a given group *calls* [italics added] ‘good’ is a fact: It is what members of the group find reinforcing” (p. 122). Moreover, he suggests that the “reinforcers that appear in the contingencies [of a culture] are its ‘values’” (p. 121). Thus, “any list of values is a list of re-