

Editors' Note: Important Topics in Applied Behavior Analysis as it Relates to Autism

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Introduction

The field of behavioral intervention as it relates to intervention for autistics/individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder¹ (ASD) has grown exponentially. As with the growth of any field dedicated to the service of others, this growth has come with its successes and failures, its inspiration and trepidations. Undoubtedly, the lives of many diagnosed with ASD and their families have been improved through the dissemination and accessibility of quality behavioral services based on the science of applied behavior analysis (ABA). There is also little doubt, and emerging evidence, that the challenges related to the rapid growth of the field have also resulted in harms as a result of the misapplication or malpractice of ABA-based services. Answers to how we may address concerns related to this rapid growth such as maltreatment, improved quality, and increased access to progressive methods are not easy and cannot be answered in a single manuscript or issue of a journal. The purpose of this issue, instead, is to continue and expand on discussions examining some recent important topics in behavioral intervention specifically as it relates to care available for autistics/individuals diagnosed with ASD.

There are several broad topics included across the papers in this special issue ranging from private equity to perspectives of autistic individuals to advances in research, and credentialing to compassion. Each paper takes an in-depth examination of each particular topic pushing us all to think deeper about the contingencies operating on our field and their effects. Furthermore, this special issue includes a variety of perspectives within ABA and autism intervention in an effort to provide the reader with pathways forward for behavior analysts, parents, and other professionals.

Zane and colleagues highlight the importance of reflecting on our own world views and how that impacts the quality and type of services we provide. Leaf and colleagues discuss the difficult crossroads behavior analysts can find themselves in when navigating working collaboratively while remaining faithful to the principles of our science. Dillenburger and Keenan identify parallels in discrimination practices experienced by immigrant communities in Britain



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after World War Two and the current debate among behavior analysts and anti-ABA advocates and discuss pathways forward. Lui reminds us of the possible damaging effects of overpromoting any particular narrative related to autistic perspectives. Gerhardt and colleagues highlight the importance of targeting meaningful curriculum to support independence as early as possible.

Melton and colleagues discuss the importance of leading with compassion and extending the current discussion around compassion to direct-line interventionists. Kristiansen provides a wonderful summary and description of the recommendations within the literature to increase cultural responsiveness in ABA.

Linnehan and colleagues begin a discussion about the contingencies leading to the development of certification and licensure within ABA as well as the resulting unintended consequences. Kazemi extends the discussion of certification and licensure to the challenges and benefits of accreditation of organizations. Gershfeld-Litvak provides a balanced discussion of the possible benefits and drawbacks of private equity entering into the field of ABA-based interventions for autistics/individuals diagnosed with ASD.

Dixon and colleagues make a strong argument for the use of group design methods and statistical analyses in an effort to expand the impact the science of behavior analysis can make on the world. Saunders provides an empirical evaluation of supervision strategies that can improve treatment fidelity as well as job satisfaction for behavior technicians providing intervention for autistics/individuals diagnosed with ASD. Finally, Ferguson and Milne examine the research to highlight progress in moving the field to a more progressive approach to ABA while highlighting several areas for continued research and improvement.

Our field has come a long way as measured by many metrics (e.g., number of individuals holding certifications, insurance providers funding ABA-based interventions for autistics/individuals diagnosed with ASD, behavior analytic publications). Nonetheless, it has yet to live up to its fullest potential and has had many missteps along the way. Our hope is that the articles included in this special issue that highlight some of our successes as well as our missteps lead to continued progress and change, especially as it relates to ABA-based interventions for autistics/individuals diagnosed with ASD. Progress at a large scale may not be easy or fast, but shifting our focus on the contingencies preventing and leading toward that progress may make the road toward progress a bit smoother and more welcoming to others focused on improving the field and outcomes for the clients we are fortunate to serve.

Footnotes

¹The terms diagnosed with autism/ASD, on the autism spectrum, individual with autism/ASD, and autistic are used throughout this paper. The authors recognize that there are varied preferences and conventions related to person- and identify-first language among the academic and autistic communities. The terminology selected for use in this paper is to be inclusive of varying preferences as well as grammar and stylistic needs and does not reflect a terminological intent.