

Recommendations of the Task Force on Public Policy

Task Force on Public Policy Association for Behavior Analysis

The Task Force on Public Policy was established by the Association for Behavior Analysis to examine ways to encourage members to contribute to policymaking relevant to the public interest. Members discussed issues pertinent to this activity and summarized their discussion in a formal report.¹

Recommendations of the Task Force for conducting and disseminating policy research and for training, technical assistance, and other services supportive of behavior-analytic research in the public policy arena are presented here.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONDUCTING POLICY RESEARCH

1. Behavior analysts should conduct research relevant to current and future policy debates.

Some behavioral research has particular relevance to public policy adoption, implementation, and review. To maximize relevance and improve timeliness of research reports, scientist-advocates may arrange interviews with interest group lobbyists, legislative aides, and policymakers. Written reports describing recent and upcoming agendas of regular and interim legislative sessions are another important source of information about current topics and policy choices.

Recommendations of the Task Force on Public Policy of the Association for Behavior Analysis. Task Force members included Stephen B. Fawcett (Chair), Gail Bernstein, Mare J. Czyzewski, Brandon F. Greene, Gerald T. Hannah, Brian A. Iwata, Leonard A. Jason, R. Mark Mathews, Edward K. Morris, Amy Otis-Wilborn, Tom Seekins, and Richard A. Winett. Copies of these recommendations may be obtained from Stephen B. Fawcett, Department of Human Development, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045.

¹ The report on "Behavior Analysis and Public Policy" was co-authored by members of the Task Force on Public Policy of the Association for Behavior Analysis and published in this issue of *The Behavior Analyst*, pp. 11-25.

2. Behavior analysts should involve elected officials and executive agency policymakers in designing and implementing behavioral interventions relevant to public policy.

By involving public policy officials early in our interventions, we increase the possibility of more active support and interest. Increasing linkages with policymakers should contribute to higher visibility, better funding opportunities, and greater chances to impact on policy decisions. Such linkages may be prompted by encouraging researchers to include in their project descriptions the process by which they originally selected the target issue, and steps they took to involve public policy officials in the intervention.

Behavior analysts must recognize, however, that those in authority do not necessarily represent the best interests of consumers of programs whose behavior is targeted for change. By also involving consumers in these research advisory groups, a greater diversity of opinions can be obtained and the interests of diverse constituents can be represented.

3. Behavior analysts should learn methodologies relevant to policymaking, including analyses of cost effectiveness and cost benefit.

In an era of cost containment, interest is often more on cost than on effectiveness. While many studies refer to procedures as "cost effective," few provide acceptable cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit analyses. This appears to be a crucial area in which behavior analysts must gain expertise. Descriptions of methods and principles of cost analyses should be read and applied to current work.

4. Behavior analysts should promote the idea that science and advocacy can be combined by presenting projects that fit this model to relevant audiences.

Science and advocacy are most often viewed as different arenas. Scientists lose credibility if they advocate a controversial position, and advocates undermine themselves by calling for detached, scientific inquiry. It is possible, in at least some instances, for science and advocacy to coalesce.

Behavior analysts should investigate the processes of models of effective scientific advocacy (e.g., Ralph Nader). When testing one or more controversial alternatives in a study, behavior analysts should pay particular attention to the authenticity and ecological validity of interventions. Effort should be taken to show how the scientific method was adhered to when presenting data from such studies. The idea that science and advocacy can be combined is furthered by presenting projects that fit this model to relevant audiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISSEMINATING POLICY RESEARCH

1. Behavior analysts should routinely identify their work's policy implications and disseminate this information to relevant policymakers, advocacy groups, and legislative research departments.

Ongoing behavioral research may suggest controlling variables relevant to a current policy debate. Behavior analysts can establish and use contacts with university relations offices, the media, interest groups, agency administrators, and legislators and their staff to discover opportunities to communicate research information.

2. Behavior analysis articles should routinely discuss the impact of research on policy, although policy relevance should not be expected of every manuscript.

Where appropriate, and in various sections of an article, behavior analysts should point out policies relevant to the particular study. This will not only provide another context for the behavior analyst audience, but also for readers outside the discipline. In addition, by

examining relevant policy, the behavior analyst is more likely to develop and evaluate programs and procedures that can have an impact on policy.

Editorial guidelines and reviewers' instructions might be amended to note the importance of discussing policy relevance when appropriate. Such notations of policy-relevant findings might be particularly appropriate for abstracts and other sections more likely to be read by a broader audience. However, this recommendation in no way means that it is desirable that all research should attempt policy relevance.

3. The ABA Program Committee should encourage symposia, forums, and papers that feature discussions of policymaking issues of importance to behavior analysis and the populations with whom the membership is working.

Relevant interest groups in ABA should be asked to encourage their members to submit papers on policymaking issues or devote some discussion to these issues. Invited papers on this topic might also be solicited by the program committee.

4. The Association, through its publications, should solicit and publish articles relevant to public policy issues, policymaking processes and contexts, and the shaping of public policies.

The ABA council should encourage editors of behavioral journals to solicit articles relevant to public policy. Such articles should serve as a reinforcer for the authors and may help to educate the membership on possible applications of behavior analysis in public policymaking. These papers could be solicited both in a general call for papers and by invitation to individual behavior analysts known for their public policy work.

In addition, when research pertaining to public policy is published in behavioral journals, the Editor should consider inviting comments from individuals who are in a position to use the research to affect development, enactment, or implementation of policy. For behavioral research relevant to particular social issues, such as highway safety or regulation

of television, commentary might be solicited from responsible government officials and advocacy and interest groups representing alternative perspectives.

5. Behavior analysts should publish and otherwise disseminate their unique conceptual system and methodology in public policy, legal, economic, and other journals that reach elected officials, agency administrators, lobbyists, and others involved in public policymaking.

Behavior analysis is little understood outside of psychology and related disciplines. At best, it is only perceived as several behavior modification procedures; at worst, it is seen as a "bag of tricks" designed to manipulate people malevolently. It is important for key players in diverse policy arenas to understand that behavior analysis offers unique concepts, principles, and methods pertinent to policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Publication of relevant behavior analysis work in journals read by policymakers and roundtable meetings between behavior analysts and policymakers are among the alternatives for promulgating behavioral analyses to the policymaking audience.

Most behavior analysts have not written for diverse audiences, however. In attempting to reach nonbehavioral audiences, one strategy is to collaborate with an established member of the target audience such as policymakers or policy analysts who have credibility and know the values, mores, and language of the audience. Such interdisciplinary collaboration, although sometimes effortful, may contribute substantially to more widespread use of behavioral principles in analyses of policymaking.

6. Behavior analysts should also find other skilled people who can present their policy-relevant research to the media.

Few researchers, if any, have training as lobbyists or media performers. Further, the typical array of professional activities usually leaves little time for other activities. However, interest groups, lobbyists, and marketers exist who are professionally trained and whose primary purpose is to foster interpersonal

and media influence. Most universities, for example, have offices of university relations that can assist in communicating research through the media.

Behavior analysts can seek out relevant interest groups and lobbyists to help communicate their findings through the media. Should such sources be used, precautions must be taken to ensure that their position, program, and data are not misrepresented or their claims exaggerated. Where a program has commercial interest, work with commercial marketers; and where it has minimal commercial potential, collaborate with social marketers.

7. The ABA central office should collaborate with the Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy's Committee on Legislative Affairs (COLA) to request policy-relevant research from its membership and develop a formal mechanism for disseminating relevant research information to policymakers.

Such periodic prompts to members might produce reports of potential relevance to ongoing policy debates particularly if prepared as policy choice documents or other appropriate reporting formats. Such relevant research might be targeted for distribution to appropriate policymakers and legislative staff. Of course, ABA would make clear that it in no way endorses the particular findings in the report other than acknowledging that its conclusions are justified according to scientific standards.

8. ABA, in cooperation with the AABT's COLA, should intervene in a policy debate via information dissemination when the approach and/or evaluation of a proposed or ongoing program is clearly counter to the principles of behavior, sound research methodology, or ethical standards.

Behavioral procedures are often misrepresented in media reports and sometimes inappropriately used in reported "applications" of behavioral principles. ABA, in collaboration with AABT's Committee on Legislative Affairs, can help create a climate where policymakers, agency personnel, and the public more

readily understand the principles and methods of behavior analysis, behavior modification, and behavior therapy. Then, too, numerous policies, for example, those which hinge on the use of incentives and disincentives, can legitimately be seen as under the purview of behavior analysis. How such systems are conceptualized, developed, and evaluated, can be a major concern of ABA. By cooperating with COLA, interested ABA members might avoid duplication while extending the issue agenda beyond behavior therapy. Public interest agencies, such as the Center for Science in the Public Interest (in Washington, D.C.), that routinely comment to the media on specific policies (e.g., on nutrition) may be an excellent model for ABA-COLA activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

1. The ABA Program Committee should recruit workshops that provide information on the policymaking context and process and that describe models for conducting and communicating policy-relevant research.

Such workshops might better prepare behavior analysts for conducting and disseminating behavioral research oriented to the contexts of policymaking. Workshops might be conducted by members who are active in COLA and by other groups interested in influencing policymaking. They could provide practical information on creating policy reports and communicating them to relevant audiences.

2. Behavior analysts should offer courses in relevant departments on the topic behavior analysis and public policy.

Courses in behavior analysis and public policy can both increase the interest of future behavior analysts in policy work and introduce future policy analysts to behavior analysis. Intra-university exchange programs involving faculty from psychology and political science depart-

ments provide one means for preparing for such courses. Team teaching involving faculty from such departments might also contribute to this goal of providing training in conducting behavior analyses of public policymaking.

Graduate programs in behavior analysis might contribute to this goal by offering didactic and practicum opportunities in public policy and by requiring study in a specialized area outside the discipline such as policy analysis.

3. ABA and AABT should cooperate in maintaining a mechanism for discovering issues relevant to current policy debates and for communicating these issues to their memberships.

Rather than attempt to establish its own policy network, ABA should encourage its members to participate in AABT's COLA and its ongoing social policy information network. This group serves as an information source for policymakers. With the addition of ABA members, its issues might be extended to include those addressed by the variety of populations with whom behavior analysts work and the guild interests of behavior analysts as well as behavior therapists. Such a collaborative policy network would permit a greater number of behavioral researchers to contribute research information to policy debates, increasing the prospects that their research will inform decision-making.

4. ABA should cooperate with COLA in acquiring model formats for communicating research information to policymakers and providing technical assistance to the membership in their use.

Policymakers and their staffs appear to act more favorably on research information provided in particular formats that are not used in scientific articles or publications. Guides for preparing policy choice reports, written and oral testimony to legislative hearings, and other communications should be made available in collaboration with COLA.

5. The Association should provide technical assistance and logistical sup-

port (e.g., mailing lists, charters) for establishing and maintaining state associations for behavior analysis that are designed to promote the effective and humane use of behavioral procedures.

State associations for behavior analysis can help develop and disseminate relevant knowledge about behavioral innovations to state policymakers. The ABA can contribute by acting as a "clearinghouse" for information about local members and requirements for establishing and maintaining state associations. In so doing, ABA may facilitate the work of these associations, spare them some expense, and prevent unnecessary "reinvention of the wheel."

6. The Association should establish a code of ethics that provides guidelines for combining behavioral science and social advocacy.

If ABA is to encourage the effective involvement of behavior analysts in public policy, it should also help establish parameters for that involvement. What is needed is ethical guidelines for applying behavior analysis to public policy issues. (Actions of citizens who happen to be behavior analysts are not the concern of the Association.) Publication and dissemination of a code of ethics for conducting and disseminating policy-relevant research and a casebook on applications of the code would be helpful.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR POLICY RESEARCH

1. ABA should cooperate with COLA in developing the memberships' potential as a resource for policymakers, including identifying areas of expertise and potential consumers of that expertise and prompting contact between researchers and policymakers.

Since most behavior analysts are not familiar or involved with public policy, organized support through a policy information network will help prompt and shape that involvement. Also, group efforts help spread the work of influencing

policy so that no one individual is overburdened. By participating in the ongoing COLA effort, already scarce resources for policy involvement can be preserved.

2. ABA should sponsor an annual award for research that best exemplifies relevance to public policymaking.

An annual award for public policymaking research would send a clear message to ABA members that the Association values and reinforces activities in this area. An appropriate prize might consist of a plaque, a check for \$200, and a reception following the award. An address might be given by the recipient at the award ceremony.

3. ABA should provide recognition for effective social advocacy efforts that utilized the policy research findings of behavior analysts.

ABA should provide recognition for the successful application of behavioral research in the influence of public policy. Having awards, poster sessions, invited workshops and symposia, and opportunities to channel gathered information to the media are just a few of the ways that ABA can more explicitly support these activities. Such recognition might encourage utilization of research in public policymaking.

4. ABA should establish a fellowship program to provide financial support for students and post-doctoral professionals to work in state and national legislative and executive offices.

This program would parallel the APA Congressional Fellow and White House Fellow programs, as well as similar programs in smaller associations such as the Society for Research in Child Development. It would be intended to support students and post-doctoral professionals to work in policymaking and policy advocacy contexts at both state and national levels. This program would develop the Association's resources for impacting on public policy by creating educational opportunities for its members. Each successful fellowship would contribute to the influence of the field in public policy.

5. ABA should study further whether certifying procedures, programs, and people would contribute to policy implementation.

Once formulated and enacted, a policy's faithful implementation requires performance by local mediators. This implies that there are potential benefits to society for several levels of action. First, the Association might identify procedures and programs whose efficacy and social validity have been established. Procedures, such as token economies, and programs, such as the Teaching-Family Model of group homes, might be prominent candidates for certification.

The Association might then promote the acceptable use of such procedures and programs by issuing guidelines for their faithful implementation; or, the Association may offer a stronger endorsement, for example, by certifying individuals who demonstrate competence in behavior analysis and the use of such specialized procedures.

Although the goals of faithful policy implementation and widespread adoption of behavioral programs might be furthered by certification, this approach may be inconsistent with other valued goals of the discipline. Of particular concern is that certification may lead to premature support for relatively ineffective procedures, increased focus on procedures rather than functional analysis of behavior, and support for guild and discipline interests rather than the welfare of client groups.

6. Behavior analysts should help es-

tablish, and participate actively in, state associations for behavior analysis designed to promote the effective and humane use of behavioral procedures.

State associations for behavior analysis can provide knowledge to state policymakers about state-of-the-art innovations in child care, education, developmental disabilities, rehabilitation, mental health and other fields. Such associations may be particularly viable since human service policy varies from state to state and their focused efforts have a greater chance of affecting policy in a coherent way. Second, the formulation of policy in the particular state where a cluster of behavior analysts reside is likely to be quite visible to them. Indeed, it is likely to have a conspicuous impact on their professional and personal lives. Therefore, state associations, as vehicles for influencing public policy, tend to capture the vested interest each of us has in bettering our own conditions. Third, there is strength (and credibility) in numbers. A collective effort of several hundred people is both meaningful and highly persuasive to elected officials and others amenable to the pressures of organized constituents. Finally, professional activity in state associations is likely to complement other professional activities since an issue which arises from a professional's experience with a local or county matter can suddenly serve as a flashpoint for the entire state if that individual has a vehicle for bringing the issue to broader attention.