Behaviorism and Philosophical Foundations

Behavior analyst certification examination

5 tasks · 8 questions on the exam · BACB Test Content Outline (6th ed.)

This area covers the philosophy that behavior analysis rests on: the goals of the science, the assumptions every scientist in the field shares, radical behaviorism as a way of explaining behavior, the four domains of the discipline and the defining dimensions of applied work. The exam rarely asks for a recited definition; it describes a statement, a study or a practitioner's reasoning and asks which assumption, domain or dimension it shows, or which explanation is mentalistic or circular.

You should be able to: Given a statement, study or practitioner's explanation, you should be able to name the goal of science it reaches, the philosophical assumption or domain it reflects, whether it is mentalistic or circular, and which dimensions of ABA it meets or fails.

Every task: the key point and the trap

A.1 Identify the goals of behavior analysis as a science (i.e., description, prediction, control).

Science seeks three levels of understanding, each building on the last: description, prediction and control.

Trap: A strong correlation between an event and a behavior is prediction, not control; only an experimental manipulation that changes the behavior demonstrates a functional relation.

A.2 Explain the philosophical assumptions underlying the science of behavior analysis (e.g., selectionism, determinism, empiricism, parsimony, pragmatism).

Determinism: the universe, behavior included, is lawful and orderly; events occur as the result of other events, so behavior has causes that can be discovered rather than arising from free will or chance.

Trap: Parsimony means choosing the simplest explanation that fits the data, not the simplest intervention or the cheapest one; and pragmatism judges an idea by whether it works in practice, not by whether it sounds reasonable.

A.3 Explain behavior from the perspective of radical behaviorism.

Radical behaviorism is Skinner's philosophy of the science: it treats everything a person does, thinking and feeling included, as behavior that is subject to the same environmental variables and principles as observable behavior.

Trap: Radical behaviorism does not deny private events or leave them out of the analysis; excluding them from scientific study is the position of methodological behaviorism.

A.4 Distinguish among behaviorism, the experimental analysis of behavior, applied behavior analysis, and professional practice guided by the science of behavior analysis.

Behaviorism is the philosophy of the science of behavior: its assumptions, values and ways of explaining behavior (radical behaviorism is its most influential form).

Trap: Using behavior-analytic procedures with a client is practice, not applied behavior analysis research; ABA as a research domain requires an analysis that demonstrates the variables responsible for change.

A.5 Identify and describe dimensions of applied behavior analysis.

Baer, Wolf and Risley (1968) defined seven dimensions of applied behavior analysis, still used to judge whether work qualifies: applied, behavioral, analytic, technological, conceptually systematic, effective and generality.

Trap: Technological means the procedures are described in replicable detail, not that technology or devices are used; and effective means a practically meaningful change, not a statistically significant one.

Key terms

Functional relation: A demonstration that a specific change in behavior reliably follows the manipulation of an independent variable, with other variables controlled.

Determinism: The assumption that behavior is lawful and caused by other events that can be identified.

Empiricism: The practice of basing knowledge on objective observation and measurement.

Parsimony: Preferring the simplest explanation consistent with the data before more complex ones.

Pragmatism: Judging the truth of a statement by its usefulness in prediction and control.

Selectionism: The view that behavior is selected by its consequences at the phylogenic, ontogenic and cultural levels.

Philosophic doubt: Continually questioning the truthfulness of what is regarded as fact, one's own findings included.

Mentalism: Explaining behavior by hypothetical inner states or processes in a mental dimension.

Explanatory fiction: A label for behavior offered as its cause, producing circular reasoning.

Private events: Behavior and stimuli accessible only to the person within the skin, explained by the same principles as public behavior.

Experimental analysis of behavior: The basic research branch that discovers fundamental principles of behavior.

Seven dimensions of ABA: Applied, behavioral, analytic, technological, conceptually systematic, effective and generality (Baer, Wolf and Risley, 1968).

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