

## BARRIERS TO EXTRAPOLATION?

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Behavior analysis began in the laboratory in the first half of the twentieth century. Many years later we may say with confidence that it has grown substantially in scope and usefulness, its application to human beings being a particularly valuable development. In the focus paper, Glenn and Malott (2004) offer suggestions of how the application of behavior analysis may be extended in the study of organizations. The comments which follow deal with two possible barriers to the extrapolation of Glenn and Malott's analytical framework, thereby providing clues to how the application of the framework might be extended. Two issues are considered. The first is the generality of analysis and the second relates to data.

The title of the focus paper indicates that it is concerned with organizational change. There are many different types of organization. However, the text is essentially concerned with a particular type of organization, namely a business concern. The implicit model is one in which the behavior analyst is a consultant advising owners or managers of a commercial company. Such organizations provide goods and services for payment and their success may be measured in terms of profit. Do labor unions, churches, or charities, for example, lend themselves to analysis from such a perspective?

It might be argued that in confining themselves to businesses, Glenn and Malott (2004) are following the lead of Skinner, whose *The behavior of organisms: An experimental analysis* (1938/1991) dealt at one level with intervention in relationship between organisms and their environment but at another level was simply discussing data collected by experimentation on white rats. Skinner discussed explicitly the question of whether it was appropriate to limit initial investigations to white rats. Admitting "a certain anthropocentricity of interests" (p. 47), Skinner considered both similarities and differences between rats and humans and justified studying rats on grounds of convenience (pp. 47-49). When behavior analysis moved out of the laboratory to deal with human beings in their natural environments it faced many problems but the key variables could still be classified as stimuli and responses. This suggests that the conceptual framework developed by Skinner when studying rats provided an adequate framework when attention was shifted to human beings.

However, unlike Skinner, Glenn and Malott provide no such justification for the way in which they limit their focus. Thus the appropriateness of taking the business concern as a starting point is open to question. One special feature of a business is that there is a clear way in which success and failure are normally judged—profitability. This

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does not mean that maximization of profits is always the overriding goal, but unless investors receive an acceptable return the rationale for the company's continued existence becomes lost. Since business consultants are normally employed by those who own or manage a company, it is natural that their work will be delimited by the overall goal of profitability. However, there are other ways of looking at organizations. One is to consider the welfare of employees. A company may be profitable but employ children working for low pay in dangerous or unhealthy conditions. How does a sports fan judge the effectiveness of a club? A sports club may be run profitably but produce dissatisfaction amongst the fans because the team does not win trophies.

Glenn and Malott (2004) might argue that their conceptual framework allows such issues to be considered. However, the two points to be stressed are, first, their analysis would appear to give priority to the overall efficiency of the firm, and, secondly, there are organizations for which it is not self evident where priority lies. That the analysis is skewed towards efficiency and economic success can be illustrated quite simply by pointing out that the authors distinguish between products and by-products. As an example of a by-product, pollution is cited. In some circumstances in which a behavior analyst might be working, the fact that an organization causes pollution might be of more central concern than the efficiency with which it produces the goods it sells. Furthermore, there are organizations for which the model of a business company just does not seem a helpful way of conceptualizing their operations. Labor unions, churches, charities and the like need to be economically viable but economic viability is not the first concern when their effectiveness is being judged. To be accepted, Glenn and Malott need to demonstrate both that their framework can deal with issues not subservient to the overall economic efficiency of the company and can handle the functioning of non-business organizations.

Consider an international charitable organization such as Save the Children Fund, which seeks out charitable donations and uses its resources to improve the lives of children living in distressing and stressful circumstances. Could Glenn and Malott's (2004) approach help us to understand its working and look for ways improving its effectiveness? Is the organization devoting too much of its resources to child soldiers and not enough primary health provisions? What is the most appropriate relationship between the methods it employs to solicit donations and the procedures it employs in the field? It does not seem to this reader that the conceptual framework presented in the focus paper is suited to dealing with such questions, but an attempt to tackle them might deflect this criticism.

A contrast has already been made between B.F. Skinner writing in the 1930s and the paper presently under discussion. One further point of contrast may be stressed. Skinner's (1938/1991) analysis is supported by empirical evidence, whilst the discussion of organizational change is almost entirely hypothetical. It is not clear whether reference to data has been excluded as a matter of deliberate choice by the authors or whether appropriate data does not at present exist. Behavior analysis is an empirical approach, so obviously the authors must envisage a coming together of their model and relevant information. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find clues in the paper as to how such an

interaction would take place. What would be the nature of the data? Would it require to be collected by innovative means derived from behaviorist principles, or could existing data be reinterpreted in the light of the model?

The lack of reference to data is particularly evident when the authors refer to issues of complexity. One role envisaged for behavior analysis is to intervene in the natural process in which organizations tend towards greater complexity. Complexity is seen as leading to redundancy and inefficiency. As organizations grow, those higher up the hierarchical structure are likely to become cut off from lower levels and take decisions which fail to take account of the contingencies faced by those at the base of the hierarchy. These assertions have a ring of truth about them, but is that good enough for behavior analysis? When the authors suggest that complexity is a barrier to change, is this simply a logical consequence of their analytical assumptions or do data already exist to support that position? It may be that almost anyone toiling in the lower levels of a large organization will intuitively agree with such sentiments, but a little reflection might throw up what appear to be counter examples. The ancient British universities of Oxford and Cambridge are notoriously large, complex and cumbersome institutions. There are many smaller, compact universities in Britain, but Oxford and Cambridge continue to excel whether one measures quality of applicants, achievements of staff or ability to attract funding. It may be that such an anomaly can be accounted for, but if our understanding is to be developed we need data and indications of behavioral ways of interpreting that data.

Glenn and Malott (2004) have taken on a considerable task and are to be commended for doing so. However, it seems unlikely that their framework will attract much support without some empirical content. The emergence of such content will doubtless lead to a refining of the analysis.

## REFERENCES

- Glenn, S. S., & Malott, M. E. (2004). Complexity and selection: Implications for organizational change. *Behavior and Social Issues*, 13, 89-106.
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