

## **ARE OPERANT PRINCIPLES SUFFICIENT TO UNDERSTAND ORGANIZATIONS? REPLY TO SALZINGER**

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We agree with Salzinger (2004) that even the smallest organizational units, such as a research laboratory, are extremely complex. A research lab involves interrelated behavior of the participating faculty and students, and that behavior is affected by a multitude of external entities, such as granting agencies, university administration, regulatory institutions, and many more. Therefore, research labs can be considered organizations, although they are usually components of larger organizations, such as universities.

Salzinger believes that behavior analysts are not ready to undertake the study of complexity. Although we certainly hope that many behavior analysts continue focusing on the behavior of individual organisms, we believe that behavior analytic concepts might be extended and elaborated to develop a world view that can address change in more complex organizational entities.

Whether or not we are fully prepared, the question remains: Should behavior analysts attempt to understand behavior and complex organizations? Without such understanding, how can we bring about organizational change? As behavior analysts, we cannot continue to ignore behavior-centered issues of tremendous complexity and significance to the population at large, such as, how can airport security be improved? How can health organizations improve services in cost-effective ways? How can universities provide access to education for underrepresented populations?

We need a way to address larger issues while remaining true to our philosophical approach. Branch and Malagodi (1980) pointed out that many of the world's current problems are the result of behavior, and traditional appeals to mental determinants are again proving inadequate. Many behaviorists appear to become mentalistic in their accounts when they have to address the larger context in which behavioral problems occur. This context often involves unexamined metacontingencies.

Salzinger's main point is summarized in the title of his commentary: "Life is complicated; analysis should be simple." In other words, ignore the complexity and do what we do best, which is to change the behavioral contingencies. Salzinger suggested that behavioral contingencies for an individual faculty member can be changed by "reduc[ing] the teaching load, provid[ing] a teaching assistant or a research assistant, or award[ing] a local research grant" (p. 140). The effect of these changes in the contingencies on the behavior of the faculty member could be measured by the products he suggested.

The difference between Salzinger's and our approach lies in the object of study. Organizations are different things than individual behavior—they entail different objects of study. If our focus of study is the behavior of an organism, we could understand it by analyzing the contingencies that bring about that behavior. But if our focus is the performance of an organization, operant contingencies are insufficient to grasp the

organization's nature. We need to appreciate the aggregate products and the set of interconnections that generate those products.

We are not interested in simply increasing the productivity of a single researcher. Instead, we are concerned with improving the productivity of the university as a whole. So providing a graduate assistant for one faculty member becomes an issue of how to administer similar support for all the research programs in the university. Maximizing resources for some programs could jeopardize the research productivity of others, as well as the productivity of other subsystems, such as teaching.

Salzinger proposed that we "learn to understand organizations by surveying the various interlocking reinforcement contingencies and determine which ones are critical, one at a time" (p. 140). How can we do that without addressing organizational complexity? How can we identify the critical contingencies without examining their effect on other subsystems or on the organization as a whole? Overlooking complexity leads to partial solutions of complex problems. Without doing the work to comprehend systems complexity, we tend to alter operant contingencies without knowing their effect on the production, quality or other critical dimensions of aggregate products.

In conclusion, we strongly encourage the continuation of the analysis of the behavior of individuals, as we have much to learn. We also believe that it is useful to begin using behavior analysis to help us understand complex organizations.

## REFERENCES

- Branch, Marc N. and Malagodi, E. F. (1980). Where have all the behaviorists gone? *The Behavior Analyst*, 3, 31-38.
- Salzinger, K. (2004). Life is complicated; Analysis should be simple. *Behavior and Social Issues*, 13, 140-142.