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Everyday Ethical Challenges for Average Citizens and Behavior Analysts

As they travel down the bumpy, pothole-riddled road to adulthood, children absorb the rules of their communities, religions, and cultures. Over a surprisingly short time, parents, relatives, teachers, and the occasional Scoutmaster pave the way for future ethical conduct. These unsuspecting adults may not realize that, every day, they are playing a key role in stating rules and delivering the consequences that will determine future adult behavior.

In any event, from the time people are young children, we can safely say that there is no consistent set of rules of ethical conduct for all citizens. If a junior high school student cheats on a test and does not get caught, he may come to believe that cheating is okay regardless of what his parent or religious leader says. A pattern can develop where "don't get caught" becomes the rule rather than "don't cheat." A child who routinely fails to do her after-school chores, makes excuses, and is forgiven may grow up to be an adult who learns to make up elaborate stories about why she was late to work or why her quarterly report was sloppy and not turned in on deadline. Over time, the cumulative result of these childhood-through-adulthood experiences produces individuals with loosely formed rules, referred to as *personal ethics*. Cheating on one's spouse, lying about why you can't visit your elderly parents, and illegally using someone else's Internet connection are all examples related to personal ethics. Personal ethics can be contrasted with *professional ethics.* When students decide to enter a graduate program in behavior analysis, they are entering a world where, suddenly, the rules are different—and explicit. To understand the possible conflicts that budding professional behavior analysts face, consider the following comparisons.

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program in behavior analysis, they are entering a world where, suddenly, the rules are different.

Favors

Friends often ask each other for favors. A favor might range from sharing a DVD or watching a friend's house while she is on vacation to borrowing a lawn mower or car for a weekend. The longer the friendship, the more intimate or complex the favors can become. "Could you tell me the name of a good counselor? My husband and I are having some personal problems," or, "If my wife asks, could you tell her I went bowling with you and the guys on Thursday night?" If a citizen who is accustomed to asking for and returning favors then begins receiving in-home services from a behavior analyst three times a week, it would not be unexpected for him to also ask the behavior analyst for favors. "Could you run the therapy session for Jimmy in the car today? I have to take my older son to soccer practice." This request might sound odd, but this actually happened to one of the first author's master's degree students. Falling back on her own history of personal ethics—people do favors for each other—the student agreed. Soon it became an everyday routine. Of course, the language training was totally ineffective in the distracting backseat microenvironment of a minivan weaving through 5 o'clock traffic.

Gossip

If you pause briefly at the checkout counter of any grocery store, you will find yourself coming in contact with gossip—and not just any gossip, but juicy gossip, complete with in-depth, full-color, Photoshop-enhanced pictures. Between magazines at the checkout counter and reality television shows, not only is gossip one of the recognized coins of the popular cultural and commercial realm, but average citizens in our society also accept it as normal. The general thinking seems to be that gossip is fun and entertaining, so what is the harm? This attitude is so pervasive that a person refusing to participate may be seen as peculiar.

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In the professional setting, behavior analysts encounter daily temptations. Consultants frequently report that parents will ask about someone else's child. "How is Maggie doing? I heard she was having some problems," a parent of another child will ask, without realizing that we cannot talk about clients or their families or reveal confidential information. To the person who wants to inquire about a client, the request seems harmless. Rather than consider the information "confidential," the person wanting to get the scoop on someone else's child views the question as just a part of the daily harvesting of bite-sized nuggets of tasty information. Talking about other people like this is gossip.

"White Lies"

In an attempt to avoid conflict or censure, it has become common in our culture for people to cover up their mistakes, motives, or other personal shortcomings with "white lies." Rather than tell a friend she doesn't want to join her for coffee because she is gossipy, the sensitive person who doesn't like conflict will offer up, "I've got to go shopping for my niece's birthday party; I'm sorry." And, of course, she will get caught. "Oh, that sounds like fun; can I join you?" Now the little-white-lying culprit will have to make additional, perhaps even more dramatic, excuses. "Well, actually, I have a lot of boxes in my car, since I have to drop off Sam's brochures at Easy Mail before I go shopping." "Oh, I can help you with that," replies the doesn't-take-a-hint friend, "We can take my new SUV; it has lots of room for boxes, and I can help you unload them." One theory says that because people so commonly use evasive tactics rather than telling the truth, they are suspicious of other people's explanations. At the other extreme, there are also plenty of people who can't read your subtle signals and will try to help you overcome every lying excuse you can offer.

Appreciation

Although there might be some variation from one part of the country to the other, it appears that there is a universal tendency for consumers, especially in-home clients, to give gifts to their favorite loveable, friendly, polite, kind, and gentle behavior analyst. After all, considering the behavior analyst is the lifesaver who has transformed the child and given the parents hope, it seems only reasonable to give this valued person some tangible form of appreciation. This might range from homemade cookies to leftover spaghetti ("It's my secret family recipe") or an invitation to go with the family to the beach for a weekend ("It will be fun; you can have fun with Damon and see what he is like when he sits and plays in the sand"). In the civilian world, people give gifts regularly, including cash for the doorman, hairdresser, and newspaper delivery person at Christmas or a bottle of wine for a friend who is having an open house. Wily clients have been known to do their own

research to find out when their BCBA's birthday is and surprise the consultant with a gift that is sure to please. Team logo ball caps, sports event tickets, books, DVDs, expensive wine, baby gifts, new CDs, and loaded gift cards are all reported gifts given to behavior analysts who have attended our workshops (none of which is allowed under 1.06(d) of the Code). Exchanging gifts creates a dual-role relationship; the client and the behavior analyst now become friends, and the BCBA is expected to return the favor at the right time.

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Advice

Citizens ask for and give advice to one another freely. They will recommend a movie, restaurant, babysitter, and maybe even a doctor without blinking. Their advice is often based on personal experience, unspecified biases, and undisclosed relationships. "There is a new carpet store on West Broadway; I got a really good deal there." Full disclosure might reveal that the brother-in-law of the person who made the recommendation owns the store. Just as they will ask a friend or neighbor to recommend a school or a realtor, many people will ask their behavior analyst what he thinks is the best way to handle a smart-aleck teen or a lazy husband.

Prior to their professional training, behavior analysts were once citizens who probably freely asked for and gave advice on a variety of topics, from what psychology course to take or where to apply for graduate school. However, once one becomes a Board Certified Behavior Analyst, the rules change considerably. As a professional, with a whole host of professional ethics to soak up, the BCBA must be careful about how and what is said to others when it comes to giving advice.

A teacher has gotten to know the behavior analyst who visits her classroom twice a week to check on Janie's progress. In the middle of a conversation about Janie's data, the teacher says, "What do you think I should do with Nunzio? You've seen him act out. I think he's got some kind of behavior disorder. What do you think?" Having one's behavior guided by a professional code of ethics is a whole new experience for many behavior analysts. While there may be a tendency to give a quick and clever retort or to toss off one-liners, the correct response is, "I'm sorry; I can't comment. He's not my client, and it would be a violation of confidentiality in any event" (BACB

Code 2.06).

Responsibility

Passing the buck when something goes wrong, staging cover-ups to avoid embarrassment, and concealing evidence of incompetence have become national pastimes among our political leaders, movie stars, and sports personalities. The average person gets desensitized, and unethical behavior seeps into the general population to the point that admitting error and confessing have become a lost art. The parents who do not take responsibility for their child's school vandalism often deny their failure to supervise effectively. Some parents go so far as to provide an alibi or excuse for the child's behavior ("He couldn't help it. He has been so sick, and his father had a drinking problem"). Such actions teach children an interesting set of rules: if negative consequences are prevented, both parties are reinforced for tactics to avoid responsibility. Behavior analysts must be aware of the possibility that there are indeed clients who have histories like this and take the necessary steps to ensure that agreements with parents are followed through. This is especially the case with parent-administered consequences in the home (e.g., "good behavior plans") where the child is earning points or privileges for reinforcers.

Summary

When it comes to ethics, behavior analysts have to make the difficult but important transition from "private citizen" to professional. If standards from one's pre-behavior-analysis life are at cross-purposes with what is expected of a BCBA, they must be abandoned and replaced with our field's rather strict Professional and Ethical Compliance Code for Behavior Analysts. Furthermore, on a daily basis, the BCBA, BCaBA, and Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) will make contact with clients, paraprofessionals, and other professionals who will engage in "unethical" behaviors, possibly tempting them or even mocking them for their straight-laced approach.

The potential conflict of a history of personal ethics versus newly learned professional ethics and our Code is a worthy challenge for our field and one that is worth engaging in for the benefits and integrity that it will bring to our profession.