Interview with Erik Arntzen

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Bio

Dr. Erik Arntzen received his Ph.D. from University of Oslo, Norway, in February 2000. Arntzen’s dissertation was focusing on variables influencing responding in accord with stimulus equivalence. He is currently Professor in Behavior Analysis at Akershus University College (AUC). Dr. Arntzen is the head of the master program in behavior analysis at AUC.

His research contributions include both basic and applied behavior analysis, with an emphasis on research in relational stimulus control and verbal behavior. He has also been interested in ethical considerations and core values in the field of behavior analysis.

Dr. Arntzen is one of the editors of European Journal of Behavior Analysis and has served on the editorials board of several journals, including the Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, The Psychological Record, International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy, and The Behavior Analyst Today.

Dr. Arntzen work

Your work, as suggests the name of your web page, shows great interest in the issue of equivalence. Can you please briefly explain what it concerns and why it is so interesting?

I’ve been interested in stimulus equivalence research since 1982. One of my professors at the university, Carl-Erik Grenness, gave me copies of the two articles by Murray Sidman published in JEAB the same year. The articles really fascinated me, and it was like opening a door to a new world. My interest within this area has been four-fold:

- (1) The emergence of new relations – not directly trained,
- (2) Studying variables that influence the emergence of equivalence relations,
- (3) Complex repertoires (i.e., concepts, problem solving, and language formation) are amenable to a behavioral analysis,
- (4) Research on stimulus equivalence and the impact on the arrangement of effective conditional discrimination procedures in behavioral programs.
Most of my research in this area has been concerned with basic research questions, but in my lab we have also conducted applied studies (see below).

It is not easy to explain in a few sentences what stimulus equivalence is about, and usually when people are explaining stimulus equivalence, they also need to draw figures to explain.

In a very simplified manner (although this is a little superficial), one could explain stimulus equivalence in terms of stimulus substitution, i.e., how members of stimuli in one class become the same.

In Figure 1, we have only presented one class of stimuli with four members. It is usually in stimulus equivalence research for three or more classes--actually a minimum requirement to test for stimulus equivalence is two classes with three members.

For simplicity I’ll skip the details here and in the figure above only one class is presented. Training (indicated by the blue, solid lines) includes training from the spoken word ‘Rabbit’ (A) to the picture of the rabbit (B), and from A to C and A to D.

The green, broken lines indicate the emergent relations, the relations that come as a result of the particular training involved in stimulus equivalence procedures, but importantly, were never directly trained; this is what we mean when we say “emergent relations” and this is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the area--something for free, as it were.

It is also important to mention that the RFT (relational frame theory) has its source in the stimulus equivalence research. For the historical record, this is crucial to remember.

*Given the importance of verbal behavior in the realm of autism, it seems that the practical application of equivalence relations could offer significant advances for this population. Is work being done? What are the results?*
I think it is quite interesting to mention that Sidman’s studies early in the nineteen seventies were concerned about teaching reading skills in mentally retarded persons (the term used at that time). He discusses very nicely in the early paper conditions which have to be present to say that one reads with understanding.

For a long time much of the research within stimulus equivalence was largely concerned with basic research questions, like for example, variables influencing responding in accord with stimulus equivalence.

Lately, a number of studies have shown that the matching to sample format can be very effective in teaching skills in, for example, children with autism. In my lab group, we have trained a whole host of different skills, for example, music skills, time skills, geography skills, synonyms, and botanic skills in participants with autism.

The most fascinating aspect of the training procedures is that you train only a certain number of relations, and you will get a number of relations for free.

The training can be done in a table-top setting, but this can be cumbersome, so we are working to develop software that can be used to train different skills (see cognitivesciencepartners.com). The end purpose of this project is that parents, therapist, teachers, etc. will be able to use this software to help their clients learn valuable functional skills.

You are one of the editors of the European Journal of Behavior Analysis (EJOBA). Since the first issue you showed an interest for conceptual aspects and the opening of criticism and internal dialogue. Can we expect a similar approach in the future? What other issues are going to be addressed?

Thanks for asking about EJOBA. In 1997 we started working on the idea of founding a journal for behavior analysis in Europe. In 2000, the first issue of the journal was printed. We have published two issues every year since then.

We have found that one of the niches for the journal was to print special issues (i.e., either one target article followed by a number of papers discussing issues raised in the target article or a number of papers within a special area).

We have published a number of special issues since 2000, on stimulus equivalence, precision teaching, and bereavement, to mention a few.

We publish papers within all areas of behavior analysis, theoretical or conceptual behavior analysis, experimental behavior analysis, and applied behavior analysis, so in this sense EJOBA is broader in scope than most other journals publishing behavior analysis.

There are of course a number of outlets of papers for people who are engaged in writing and
publishing their work, but we want the journal to be a flagship for behavior analysis in Europe.

ABA in Norway

Without doubt Norway is a European country where Behavior Analysis has a stronghold. To what is owed this success?

It started back in the nineteen seventies when the Norwegian Association for Behavior Analysis was founded (1973), actually one year before ABAI. Since then the number of members gradually increased, and today it is about 1000 members in the association.

I don’t know the significance for the dissemination of behavior analysis in Norway, but it is interesting anyway and that is the fact that Ole Ivar Lovaas is actually from Norway and moved to the US.

However, I’m sure that a number of psychologists in Norway were made aware of behavior analysis at that time because of Lovaas’ work. Arne Brekstad has been a very important person and probably was the most important for the dissemination of behavior analysis in Norway.

At the universities in Norway, behavior analysis has more or less been wiped out in the last few years, and it has never had a strong position there. I think this is a situation that is not uncommon, certainly in Europe.

The situation has been quite different at some of the university colleges however, and specially at Akershus University College and Ostfold University College. The Norwegian ABA has always been very strong in the applied settings, and I think this has gained in strength since 1990.

Most of the members in the Norwegian ABA have a bachelor degree in social welfare, only 5-8 % are psychologists and about 5 % have master degree in behavior analysis.

However, I think the situation is changing now, and largely because of the master program in behavior analysis that started in 2004 and very soon a PhD program in behavior analysis will start at Akershus University College. The program is accredited by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education. This will be the first PhD program in behavior analysis in Europe. Undoubtedly, this will be very important for the dissemination of behavior analysis in Europe.

Norwegian ABA has an annual four-day conference with multiple tracks. The conference is located at a hotel in the mountains, www.storefjell.no. The number of attendees each year is about 800 so this is the largest meeting of behavior analysts anywhere outside of the ABAI US meetings I think, may be except from Brazil.

We also have a two-day seminar before the conference in which we discuss one topic. For example, this year we are going to work with different aspects of verbal behavior. Julie and Ernest Vargas, Skinner Foundation, are going to give invited presentations on the topic.
The ABA in Europe

European analysts lag behind with their American homologues in respect to creating associations, congresses, activities, etc. However, it seems that in the last few years there are more and more initiatives over Europe. How do you see the present and future of all of that?

Founding of an organization in Europe was discussed for a number of years before the EABA organization was founded in 2001. There were many people involved in the discussions of course, but Fergus Lowe, Paolo Moderato, and Arne Brekstad were the core people in the process of founding the European ABA.

The organization has grown substantially lately, and we are now about 300 members. The EABA arranges a conference every second (even) year and the EABG (Experimental Analysis of Behavior Group) arranges a conference the other (odd) years in London. In addition, there are a number of other conferences in Europe and also annual conference arranged by the different countries.

Behavior analysis as a field has grown very much over the last few years and for example there now 16 master programs in behavior analysis around in Europe.

I think the development of master programs in behavior analysis has had a very important impact on the development of behavior analysis in general and the level of people who are practicing behavior analysis in applied, research, and teaching settings.

The next EABA conference will be in Crete in September 2010. Stay tuned.

Furthermore, I think the important step in the future will be to extend the number of master programs and to start PhD programs in behavior analysis in all the countries in Europe. The Akershus PhD programme has perhaps provided an example of how this may occur.

In terms of ABA, what are the most significant differences between the way of working in Europe with respect to the United States and other countries?

First of all I think it is essential to point at that behavior analysis includes

- (1) theoretical or conceptual analysis,
- (2) experimental analysis and
- (3) applied analysis.

Furthermore, a fourth area is what you can call practical demonstrations. Finally, you have radical behaviorism as the philosophy of science. I mention this because we should never miss that all these domains are significant when we develop behavior analysis in the future.

I think it is important to notice that behavior analysis is a universal science and in this respect it is no different wherever you practice it. This situation is quite different from psychology for example. For behavior analysis this may turn out to be a great strength in the internalization of behavior analysis with issues like professionalism of the approach.

A difference at in least within the experimental behavior analysis has been the much larger diversity of laboratories in the US compared to Europe. Behavior analysts have had a much greater opportunity to get their training in a laboratory in the US which I think is advantage.

Fortunately, there is for example a growing understanding in Norway for the importance of having
such training opportunities for master students. I think training in a laboratory with nonhumans or humans is very important because as student you learn some very important skills in the basics of behavior analysis.

In addition, you get training in how to achieve experimental control. My take on this is that these are skills which are very useful for example in an applied setting.

Would you find interesting the creation of a European ABA consulting organization? For example the creation of a web page with a FAQ section?

I think one of the challenging issues with online consulting or even telephone consulting is the fact that you don’t actually observe the participant yourself. It is also difficult with FAQ because it is very often much more than yes or no answers and one thing we know about behavior is that it is varies both within and across, according to their current environment and their learning histories – so each situation is inherently individualistic.

However, I see the importance of bringing the “good things” out to the people. Many of those TV shows as Super Nanny and those programs have been very focused on reducing behavior, so of course it should be important to inform how to a build a functional repertoires as well.

Parent Questions

Is there an age limit as to when training with ABA is no longer effective? Or does the age have no importance?

The age per se is not the important variable, but rather the learning history. Of course it is important to start the intervention as early as possible. However, there are a number of examples with successful treatments with older participants.

In Norway, there are habilitation services in each county and these are not early interventions programs. The organization of the services varies across counties, but very often it is a habilitation service for children and one for adults. The point in bringing this up is that the experience for a long time has been that treatment based on behavior analysis is effective also for adults.

Should ABA be applied continuously, without interruption, throughout the autistic’s person’s life?

I think that it is often needed with a treatment program for a long time. It is difficult to answer this question categorically. It is also important to note that behavior analysis is not just one thing. It is not a bag of tricks or procedures.

I think one of the most important changes has been from calling what we do behavior therapy or behavior modification to calling it applied behavior analysis—the significant aspect of this is the emphasize on analysis.

There are some “John Wayne types” out there, i.e., people practicing what they call “behavior analysis” without the proper training and appreciation of the complexity and sophistication of the science – treating it as a bag of tricks to “fix” behavior problems. Of course behavior analysis is much more than this.

About ABA

It seems that there are two mainstreams of direction within ABA. One more pragmatic
and direct inclined to the use of pre-established curricular activities (a curricular approach) and a second one asking for treatments adapted to the child’s needs (a functional approach). In your opinion, which one would be the right option?

Not to be too offensive here, but I think it is important to ask about the child’s need when a treatment is implemented. So although I can see the benefits in established curriculum, it is necessary to appreciate the individual always and thus take a functional approach.

An area I have done some research in myself is verbal behavior. Instead of training each verbal class separately, as may have been the case in a traditional approach, we run some teaching programs in which we have trained all verbal classes, echoic, tact, mand, intraverbal, textual, etc. simultaneously. The results from these programs have been quite promising.

In the coming years, which do you think will be the most important advances for autism. Is it possible that the genetic field or any other field different than the behavioral will offer solutions that make it possible to avoid intensive behavioral treatments?

If you mean that the genetic field or other fields different than behavioral will make intensive behavioral treatments superfluous, I definitely don’t think that will happen.

However, I think the question is quite interesting. I see a danger that behavior analysis is so focused on treatment programs for persons with autism.

Do not misunderstand me on this point—of course it is perhaps one of our greatest accomplishments as a field that we have shown how effective the intensive behavioral treatment is. But my concern is about a one-sided focus on autism. I use an example in my classes -- in which I tell the students to think of a scenario in which a pill is developed which miraculously ‘cures’ autism.

The question I ask them is: what about behavior analysis then? We should not forget that the focus is on behavior, and this is not dependent on who is actually performing the behavior.

I think it is important to mention that in spite of the focus on autism, behavior analysis has been shown to be effective for a number of groups of people and across a wide spectrum of issues, i.e., gambling behavior, obsessive compulsive behavior, reading, language development just to mention some.

I think if behavior analysis is going out flourish in the future it is in areas other than autism that we will have to impact.

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