Using Baer, Wolf, and Risley’s “Some Current Dimensions of Applied Behavior Analysis” to Guide Ethical Treatment Decisions

James T. Todd
Eastern Michigan University
• **Applied**: Applied interventions deal with problems of demonstrated social importance.

• **Behavioral**: Applied interventions deal with measurable behavior (or reports if they can be validated).

• **Analytic**: Applied interventions require an objective demonstration that the procedures caused the effect.

• **Technological**: Applied interventions are described well enough that they can be implemented by anyone with training and resources.

• **Conceptual Systems**: Applied interventions arise from a specific and identifiable theoretical base rather than being a set of packages or tricks.

• **Effective**: Applied interventions produce strong, socially important effects.

• **Generality**: Applied interventions are designed from the outset to operate in new environments and continue after the formal treatments have ended.
The label applied is not determined by the research procedures used but by the interest which society shows in the problems being studied. In behavioral application, the behavior, stimuli, and/or organism under study are chosen because of their importance to man and society, rather than their importance to theory. (p. 92)

Ask yourself:

Will solving the problem materially improve the lives of the people directly affected by the intervention?
Behavioral

Behaviorism and pragmatism seem often to go hand in hand. Applied research is eminently pragmatic; it asks how it is possible to get an individual to do something effectively. Thus it usually studies what subjects can be brought to do rather than what they can be brought to say; unless, of course, a verbal response is the behavior of interest. Accordingly a subject's verbal description of his own non-verbal behavior usually would not be accepted as a measure of his actual behavior unless it were independently substantiated. (p. 92)

Ask yourself:

*Is this a real behavior you can measure and demonstrate objectively and reliably?*
Analytic

The analysis of a behavior, as the term is used here, requires a believable demonstration of the events that can be responsible for the occurrence or non-occurrence of that behavior. An experimenter has achieved an analysis of a behavior when he can exercise control over it. By common laboratory standards, that has meant an ability of the experimenter to turn the behavior on and off, or up and down, at will. (pp. 93-94)

Ask yourself:

*Can you show, using objective methods, that what you have done is actually and clearly responsible for the treatment effects?*
Technological

"Technological" here means simply that the techniques making up a particular behavioral application are completely identified and described. In this sense, "play therapy" is not a technological description, nor is "social reinforcement"....The best rule of thumb for evaluating a procedure description as technological is probably to ask whether a typically trained reader could replicate that procedure well enough to produce the same results, given only a reading of the description. (p. 95)

Ask yourself:

*Is the treatment described precisely enough that a properly trained person can understand, critique, or apply it effectively?*
Conceptual Systems

The field of applied behavior analysis will probably advance best if the published descriptions of its procedures are not only precisely technological, but also strive for relevance to principle....the total description is adequate for successful replication by the reader; and it also shows the reader how similar procedures may be derived from basic principles. This can have the effect of making a body of technology into a discipline rather than a collection of tricks. (p. 96).

Ask yourself:

Is the intervention derived from body of scientifically derived basic principles such that each of the embedded principles can be clearly identified? Are modifications of the procedures based directly on the principles?
Effective

If the application of behavioral techniques does not produce large enough effects for practical value, then application has failed. Non-applied research often may be extremely valuable when it produces small but reliable effects, in that these effects testify to the operation of some variable which in itself has great theoretical importance. In application, the theoretical importance of a variable is usually not at issue. Its practical importance, specifically its power in altering behavior enough to be socially important, is the essential criterion. (p.96)

Ask yourself:

Are the effects of the treatment big enough when done by experts that we can expect reasonably skilled non-experts to get good results?
Generality

A behavioral change may be said to have generality if it proves durable over time, if it appears in a wide variety of possible environments, or if it spreads to a wide variety of related behaviors. (p. 96).

Ask yourself:

*Is the treatment explicitly designed to work once the therapist leaves and the intervention is formally discontinued?*
Summary

• Is the effect important?
• Can the effect be objectively measured?
• Can I prove it works?
• Is it clearly described?
• Is it based on demonstrated scientific principles?
• Does it produce strong effects?
• Is it designed to work once the therapy ends?
Basic Four-Step Program Evaluation

• **Assessment of needs:** An objective, empirically based determination of the necessity of the proposed program.

• **Program planning:** Objective, empirically based program development, based on a determination of appropriate resources and ongoing support. Includes setting objective, measurable goals and objectives.

• **Formative Evaluation:** An objective analysis of the degree to which the program is being implemented as planned.

• **Summative Evaluation:** An objective analysis of the degree to which the program goals have been achieved.
End