

## Commentary on “In celebration: living a life through Positive Behaviour Support”

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to provide a commentary on Shephard's narrative account of one person's experience of Positive Behaviour Support (PBS).*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *This paper reflects on Shephard's account in the context of the burgeoning literature concerning the effectiveness of PBS and the author's own experiences.*

**Findings** – *Practitioners of PBS should consider narrative accounts as legitimate data.*

**Originality/value** – *This commentary welcomes the move toward the inclusion of narrative, or ethnographic, perspectives when evaluating PBS.*

**Keywords** *Positive Behaviour Support, Person centred, Narratives, Human stories, Ethnography*

**Paper type** *Viewpoint*

### Approaches to Positive Behaviour Support

In 2009, a definition appeared that summed up my experiences of what was termed Positive Behaviour Support (PBS):

PBS unites the precision of a careful, analytical examination of the functions of problem behaviour, a broader framework of person centred-values and processes, and an emphasis on teaching alternative skill repertoires (Bradley, 2009, p. vi).

A little while before, whilst working alongside some skilled and dedicated colleagues on behalf of an individual with a reputation for behaviour that really challenged those around her, a mother, as an aside, said: “At last! I could recognise my daughter in your report”. All we had done as a “challenging behaviour” team was learn to listen to their family’s wishes and needs, not our own. We had applied our knowledge to their issues in a way they could use.

Partnership working is the element of PBS most consumers appear to value, but the element most lacking in published accounts (for notable exceptions, see Turnbull and Turnbull, 1990, 2011). Though PBS is as Bradley describes, it is a joint endeavour. Practitioners of PBS need to be equally sensitive to the benefits of sound person-centred work as they do to the behavioural sciences; the former is at least as complex and hard to do well as the latter. This implies the need for PBS practitioners to refine their language and their selves to fit the contexts within which they work. I conceptualise practitioners of PBS as contributors to a shared endeavour.

Carr *et al.* (1999, p. 83) in their analysis of the evidence for the effectiveness of PBS remind practitioners that “consumers [...] judge interventions in terms of their practicality and relevance and are concerned with how well intervention plans mesh with the realities of the complex social systems in which consumers must function. The database [...]

more concerned with issues of rigor and demonstrations of experimental control, generally failed to focus on larger consumer goals". It is this failure that synthesised many people's concerns about the mechanistic application of applied behaviour analysis in real world settings into the development of PBS in the first place.

Including the voices of people receiving PBS will contribute to practitioners of PBS avoiding being perceived as distant figures, as morally neutral servants of technology. Skinner (1971) warns any technology is morally neutral and can be used by saint and villain. Such moral disengagement from the problems at hand and the lack of awareness of the effects of our presence in the situation is, of course, the point where any methodology leaves the ethical rails and begins to work on, not with, people. It is the point people speak of subjects not people.

Moral disengagement can result in the dehumanisation of people into problems requiring imposed solutions. Moral disengagement "weakens self-restraint over injurious conduct, [while] adherence to moral self-sanctions fosters pro-social relations. It is difficult to hurt others who are humanised and not blamed entirely for their life predicaments" (Bandura *et al.*, 1996, p. 371). PBS practitioners, by listening to consumers, by adopting a moral framework inherent in the work of the originating communities of practice of person-centred planning, might therefore bear in mind their involvement with, as opposed to power over, vulnerable people.

And so the soundest advice I think I can offer practitioners of PBS is the advice I myself received: when consulting to families, services or schools, turn up, shut up and listen. For me, PBS at its best is about giving consumers voice, choice and dignity. It is morally right and scientifically sound to involve people. Weiss and Knoster (2008) argue that the foregoing of punishment does not automatically make an approach positive or person centred; they suggest we ask whether the methods of our work are life affirming. Would we use the interventions we propose with people we love most?

John Shephard's article is therefore a welcome addition to the developing literature concerning the application of PBS in the UK. Such descriptive pieces add to the careful analyses available; by writing of lifestyle and rapport (Magito McLaughlin and Carr, 2005), the author speaks clearly to consumers as well as balancing accounts of the application of schedules of differential reinforcement and ecological manipulations. Such qualitative "stories" as can be found in articles such as In Celebration are about faces, whereas quantitative technical reports tend to be about numbers (O'Brien, 2002). Both are about working with people in distress. Both methods aim to communicate what works.

PBS then is becoming a catchall term describing a range of approaches seeking first to understand evidentially, and then intervene validly, within contexts associated with problematic behaviours. Whilst the basis of PBS might be functional assessment and constructive interventions in many situations (Carr *et al.*, 1994; Horner *et al.*, 1990), person-centred planning and group action planning offer practitioners innovative and pragmatic methods toward shared solutions (Lucyshyn *et al.*, 2002). Ted Carr (2007) suggested that, as PBS seeps into new domains of application, it will adopt with new methods and disciplines (such as positive psychology and organisational management) that help practitioners to reconsider what really matters to consumers: happiness, helpfulness and hopefulness.

PBS is evolving due to its doing, but the new methods are all aimed at supporting people to gain lifestyles we ourselves might value. PBS seeks to work in partnership with, not do to. So we see the growth of ethnographies of PBS – tales from the field detailing people's experiences and meanings of PBS. Like ethnographies throughout history some people love them, some loathe them because some prefer numbers, some faces. There is room, I would suggest, for both.

## Redefining data

Data come in different styles; but data are more than numbers. Data are asides and polemics, values, feelings and constructions of shared meaning. Because of the well-documented origins of PBS there was an early bias towards quantitative data. (Unless we danced

in the regulated way, we might lose our status as scientists.) As PBS began to demonstrate one did not need punishment or aversives to teach new skills and improve environments, naturally authors adopted the style of data they had learned. And after all, the audiences requiring proof that such approaches were effective liked numbers. Both our focus and words have evolved along with our methods. PBS reports both stories and numbers. In Celebration is toward one end of this spectrum of accounts.

Given Carr *et al.*'s kindly reminder cited above, it is useful to ask ourselves whether numbers or stories, or some wonderful combination thereof, are what people using and experiencing PBS require. Will our "great works", chock full of numerical representations of topographies and contingencies, our styles of writing and presentation that are helpful for research journal audiences be equally useful to families and people living with our clinical accusations?

## Tomorrow

PBS is a continuum of approaches (person-centred planning, group action, functional assessment, skills building, etc.) that lead to accomplishment (a life). If we define PBS too specifically and reduce it to its component elements, we limit our ability to include the voice of practitioners and consumers; we exclude the innovations occurring in practice. We should remember the hard lessons of history.

Through reflection, through the different perspectives articles such as In Celebration offer, we might consider the potential dangers of the institution of the mind, a state Ericsson (2005, p. 60) considers the final challenge of deinstitutionalisation. Independence, rights, choice and inclusion, the fundamental outcomes all practitioners strive towards if adhering to the value-goals of *Valuing People*, all presuppose "equality between the person with disability and those providing services". Perhaps PBS should strive to make that goal more tangible.

Positive behaviour support is not learned from a book but from doing and being with a fellow human. It is about getting a life (Risley, 1996). It is learned from thinking not only about technical procedures and clinical validity but also from witnessing growing friendships and increasing happiness. Such outcomes are not optional extras but the very heart of PBS.

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