



# Low publication rate of 2005 conference presentations: Implications for practitioners serving individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities



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## ABSTRACT

This study determined the percentage of presentations at the annual conference of the Association for Behavior Analysis in 2005 with the autism (AUT) and developmental disabilities (DDA) codes ( $N = 880$ ) that (a) provided continuing education credits (CEs) for Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) and Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts (BCaBAs) and (b) included content that was published in a peer-reviewed outlet. Results indicate that only 77 (8.8%) presentations were ultimately published. Although posters were not eligible for CEs, posters accounted for 57.1% of the published presentations. Specifically, posters presented by a university-affiliated presenter accounted for 44.2% of presentations with published content. As a whole, only 10.4% of AUT and DDA presentations offering CEs contained data sets that were published. Considered together, these results suggest that the content provided to BCBAs and BCaBAs for CEs may not be adequately measured or sufficiently rigorous to guide clinical practices.

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## 1. Introduction

The present article offers analysis of publication rates of conference presentations relevant to the services provided for individuals diagnosed with either autism or intellectual disabilities. For the purpose of a succinct analysis, we selected a specific domain – behavior analysis – in the treatment of those with autism and intellectual disabilities. Behavior analysis lends itself well to such analysis, as its literature on said treatment is extensive (Matson, Matson, Lott, & Logan, 2002). Despite exclusive analysis of the behavior-analytic domain, the discussion may be generalized to other disciplines involved in the treatment of individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities, as the analysis of publication rates of conference presentations is applicable to any domain from which a clinician might provide treatment and services.

The annual conference for the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABA-I) includes presentations in the form of papers, symposia, posters, panel discussions, workshops, and Expo posters. Submissions for each type of presentation are reviewed by ABA-I representatives to ensure they meet submission guidelines as outlined in an annual call for papers. Presentations in the form of symposia, panel discussions, and workshops may provide continuing education units (CEs) for

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Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) and Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts (BCaBAs). Kangas and Vaidya (2007) reviewed trends in presentations at ABA-I from 1980 through 2007. Among other trends, Kangas and Vaidya noted sharp increases in both the number of overall attendees and applied presentations in 2003. The authors noted that these increases likely corresponded with requirements for BCBAs and BCaBAs, the majority of whom provide services to individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities, to obtain a minimum of 36 and 24 CEs every three years, respectively, to maintain certification. Given these requirements, it is possible that demand for CEs may be controlling much of the presentation content at the ABA-I conference.

In order to provide CEs at the annual ABA-I conference, a submission must meet three general requirements. The submitting author must (a) affirm that the event covers behavior analysis practice, theory, or methodology, (b) affirm the presence or supervision of a continuing education (CE) instructor who meets qualifications as outlined by Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB), and (c) attest that the CE instructor and any co-instructors have completed substantial formal or experiential training in the subject matter of the presentation (ABA-I, 2013). The BACB guidelines require that the CE instructor (a) holds a doctoral degree and meets either the coursework or college teaching option for fulfilling BCBA eligibility requirements, (b) has completed all requirements for a doctorate degree except the dissertation, meets the coursework option for BCBA eligibility, and has completed graduate coursework or has published in the subject matter on which Type 2 CE instruction is provided, or (c) is an active BCBA (ABA-I, 2013).<sup>2</sup>

If presentations submitted to the ABA-I conference meet all requirements as outlined by ABA-I and the CE instructor meets all requirements as outlined by the BACB, the CE instructor may provide CEs to BCBAs and BCaBAs who attend the presentation. As such, an analysis of the extent to which these presentations effectively educate and affect practices of behavior analysts is warranted. In addition, an analysis of the quality of the educational content contained within these presentations is warranted. The present study is a first step toward determining an appropriate method for addressing the latter goal.

To facilitate an analysis of the quality of educational content, an index by which quality can be evaluated must be adopted. However, ABA-I is currently without such an index, at least in any formal sense. One possible index of the quality of CE presentations at ABA-I is the percentage of presentations that are published in peer-reviewed journals such as the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* (JABA), the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disabilities* (JADD), *Behavioral Interventions*, *The Analysis of Verbal Behavior* (TAVB), *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, and other journals that publish behavior-analytic studies. That is, one may argue that a high percentage of publications in scholarly journals may suggest a high quality of presentation content and, by extension, indicate a high-quality of CE instruction for BCBAs and BCaBAs. In contrast, a low percentage of publications associated with these CE-approved presentations may represent a problematic drift away from evidence-based practice. These assumptions, however, should not be accepted without further consideration.

Thus, the purpose of this study is two-fold. First, this study provides a descriptive analysis of publication rates of ABA-I presentations as a preliminary index of presentation quality. As discussed in more detail later, it must be stressed that while the current data may not be the only measure for evaluating the quality of ABA-I presentations and CE, the data are currently available for analysis. As such, the second purpose of this paper is to urge that (a) other measures of quality be put into place within the framework of the ABA-I conference that allow for an adequate analysis of the CE provided to attendees, (b) antecedent manipulations be adopted within the submission process to promote awarding CE credits to only presentations that are of sufficient scientific merit, or (c) both.

The current investigation evaluated the publication rate of content presented at the ABA-I conference in 2005. Other professional disciplines have evaluated the quality of research presentations by determining the percentage that are published in peer-reviewed outlets (e.g., Abicht, Donnenwerth, Borkosky, Plovianich, & Roukis, 2012; Macmillan, Moore, Cook & Pedley, 2007; O'Neill et al., 2014; Roukis, 2011; Tyagi, Chugh, Kumar, & Sethi, 2013); this standard was applied in the present study. To our knowledge, no study has evaluated the percentage of presentations at ABA-I or other behavior-analytic conferences that may contain content that is ultimately published. To obtain such data, we opted to track presentations made at ABA-I 2005 because (a) ABA-I<sup>3</sup> is the largest and most attended behavior-analytic conference that offers CEs for BCBAs and BCaBAs and (b) we assumed that sufficient time had passed for presentations made in May of 2005 to be published in a peer-reviewed outlet.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Dependent variables and data collection

An analysis of all titles and corresponding abstracts presented as posters, papers or symposia at ABA-I 2005 was conducted beginning in April 2012 and concluded in March 2014. An initial search was conducted using the 2005 ABA-I conference program and online archives. All presentations categorized either primarily or secondarily in the areas of autism (AUT) or developmental disabilities (DDA) were utilized for the current investigation. These domains were chosen as the

<sup>2</sup> One minor change in the guidelines has occurred since 2004 (Ratcliff, personal communication, February 10, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> According to Kangas and Vaidya (2007), there were nearly 4000 attendees in 2005.

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