MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY College of Education

A Behavioral Systems Approach to Risk Mitigation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Matthew T. Brodhead, Ph.D., BCBA-D
Assistant Professor
Michigan State University

Ethics Defined

- “The emission of behavior in compliance/coordination with the verbally stated rules and behavior-analytic cultural practices guiding practitioner behavior that are espoused by the BACB Code.” (Brodhead, Quigley, & Cox, 2018)

- We are concerned, primarily, with following the BACB Code

Ethics are Important

- Many of us provide behavioral services to some population of individuals
  - If not, you currently, or may one day, provide supervision to those who do
- Sometimes, our oversight of professional and/or ethical behavior may go by the wayside
  - Especially since time spent promoting these skills may not translate to billable hours
- However, ethical and professional behaviors should not be ignored

Unethical Behavior

- Unethical behavior may result in
  - 1) loss and/or harm to consumers
  - 2) damage to the company's reputation
  - 3) litigation
  - 4) harm to the field of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

Behaving Ethically

- Most of us know what we need to do
  - Very few people wake up in the morning and say, “I’m going to do wrong today”
- The difficulty lies in translating our guidelines into behaviors that produce desired outcomes in practice
- May occur for a few reasons
  - Training may rely heavily on teaching memorization of the code and case studies that may or may not be relevant to practice
  - Difficulty establishing and maintaining situation-specific behavior that meets standards set by the BACB

Purpose of Presentation

- To demonstrate how organizations may use readily available tools to inform systems of ethics training and supervision that meet BACB guidelines and the organization's own needs
  - 1) Describe a conceptual process for developing systems of ethical and professional behavior
  - 2) Provide example of a system of risk mitigation for the COVID-19 pandemic

Behavioral Systems

- Behavioral systems may be the answer we are looking for
- What is a system?
  - “An organized, integrated unified set of components, accomplishing a particular set of ultimate goals or objectives” (Malott & Garcia, 1987)
- Behavioral systems allow for the standardization of processes and policy that occasion desirable employee behavior
- Systems are purposeful, not random
- Additional reading:
  - Sigurdsson & McGee (2015)
  - Diener, McGee, & Miguel (2009)

Behavioral Systems

- A well designed system meets the needs of an organization
- **Example**: The goal of a baseball team is to win
  - When the team performs well, they win
  - When they perform poorly, they lose
- **Example:** Organizations aim to act in the best interest of their clients
  - When the organization behaves ethically and professionally, they achieve this goal
  - When the organization is unethical and/or unprofessional, they do not achieve this goal

Example: Discrete Trial Instruction

- ***"An organized, integrated unified set of components, accomplishing a particular set of ultimate goals or objectives"***
- Goal: Systematically provide instructional opportunities
- How is accomplished?
  - Standardization of instructor behaviors
  - Train instructors and provide feedback
  - Observe instructor behavior over time to ensure high treatment integrity
- Discrete trial instruction is a system that must operate smoothly in order for individuals to learn

Example: Functional Analysis

- ***"An organized, integrated unified set of components, accomplishing a particular set of ultimate goals or objectives"***
- Goal: Analyze the environmental variables that may be responsible for the occurrence of problem behavior
- How is this accomplished?
  - Train employees how to identify potential controlling variables
  - Train employees to develop and implement experimental conditions
  - Observe implementation over time to ensure high procedural fidelity
- Functional analysis is a system that must operate smoothly in order for instructors to accurately identify variables responsible for problem behavior

Ethics

- The systems necessary for engaging in ethical behavior are often much less clear
- Examples:
  - Be a good collaborator
  - Avoid multiple relationships
  - Operate within your own scope of competence
  - Provide appropriate supervision
  - Act in the best interest of your clients
- When people behave unethically, we often blame them for their own actions
  - *Victim blaming*: saying the victim of the problem is the cause of the problem

The organism is always right.

The organization is responsible for employee behavior, because the organization has control over the environment.

*Technically, organisms behave, and organizations do not.

Behavioral Systems

- In a clinical organization, systems of ethical training and supervision must be established
  - to meet the needs of the organization
  - to comply with the BACB Code of Ethics
  - to best meet the needs of its clients
  - as an antecedent strategy to promote appropriate behavior
  - as an antecedent strategy to prevent misconduct
- The 6 Steps of Behavior Systems Analysis provides a straight-forward tool for making changes and meeting goals within an organization

Six Steps of Behavioral Systems Analysis

- Analyze the natural contingencies
- Specify the performance objectives
- Design the system
- Implement the system
- Evaluate the system
- Revise until you reach performance objectives

ASDIER: a tool for systems change

Six Steps of BSA

- Analyze the natural contingencies:
  - Is there a need for change?
  - What are the problems we face?
- Specify the performance objectives:
  - What organizational needs have to be met?
  - "…organization will teach, maintain, and monitor behavior that complies with the BACB Code of Ethics."

Six Steps of BSA

- Design the system:
  - Who will manage the change?
  - Who will take over when it's finished?
  - Will it be an addition to a job description or require the creation of an entire department?
  - In this case, it's often helpful to diagram system you want to create.

Final Steps of BSA

- Implement the system:
  - Once it's designed, execute the plan.
- Evaluate the system:
  - What measures can be used to judge its success?
    - Feedback from consumers.
    - Feedback within the organization.
      - Social validity.
  - Feedback from other health care providers.
  - Feedback from the field of behavior analysis.
- Recycle until you reach the performance objectives:
  - Analyze the data, and make changes accordingly.
  - Most likely, you'll never get past this phase.
    - There is room for improvement at every level of every organization.
    - There is no perfect machine; there is no perfect system.

Six Steps of Behavioral Systems Analysis

- Analyze the natural contingencies
- Specify the performance objectives
- Design the system
- Implement the system
- Evaluate the system
- Revise until you reach performance objectives

ASDIER: a tool for systems change

Sample System

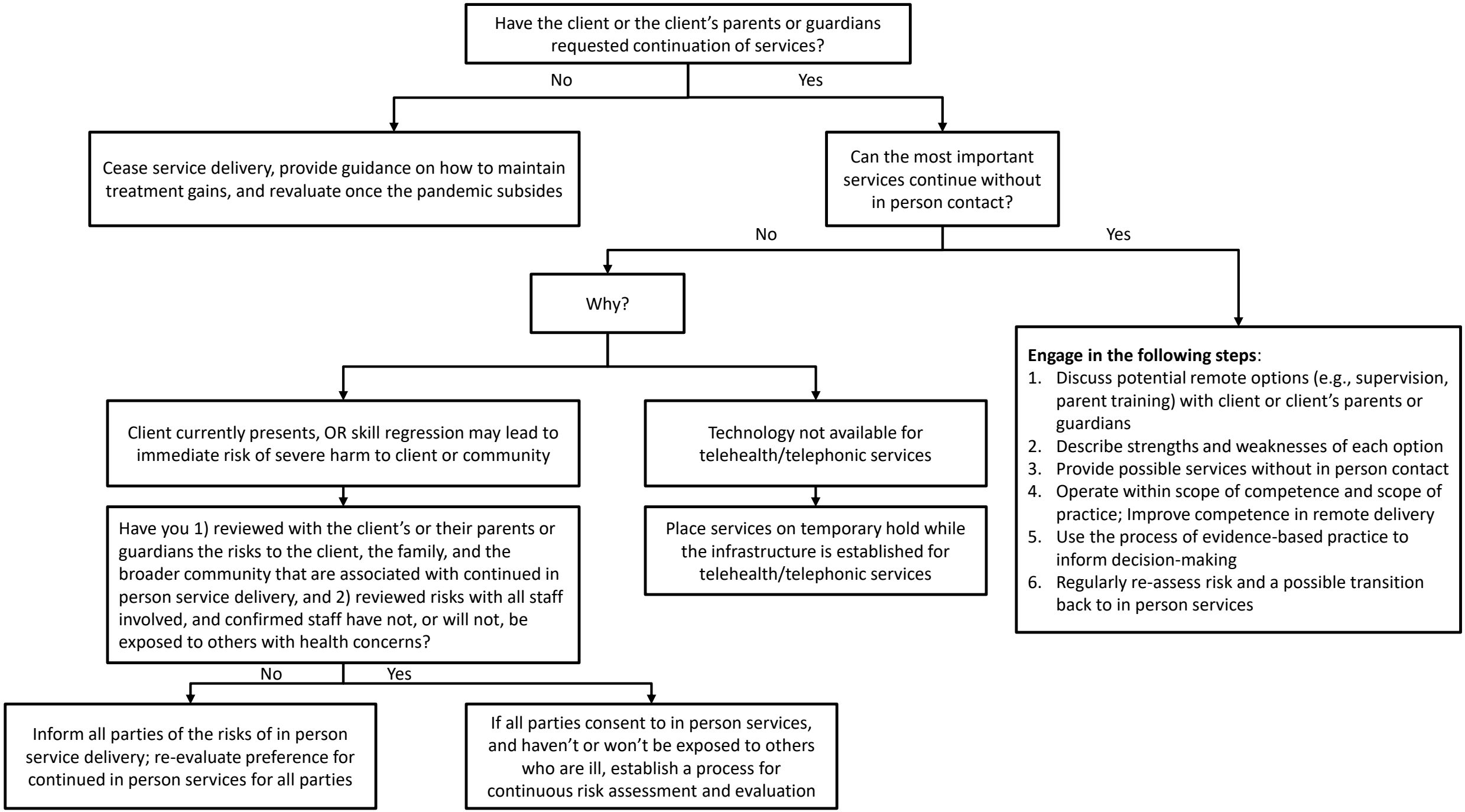
- The following is an example of BSA applied organizational decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic
- The purpose of this example is to demonstrate how a system may translate the BACB Code into processes designed to improve employee behavior
  - Processes should inform ***what to do*** instead of ***what not to do***
- Standardizing processes also increases the probability that employees will make the right choices
  - Reduces judgement that results in errors

Analyze the Environment

- Close contact places ABA providers and ABA consumers, and the community within which the both groups travel at an increased risk of contracting COVID-19.

Specify the Performance Objectives

- The ABA provider will decide to continue in-person ABA services on a client-by-client basis,
- The ABA provider will act in the best interest of the client
- The ABA provider will assure the safety and well-being of all employees, including behavior technicians


Have the client or the client's parents or guardians requested continuation of services?
No
Yes
Cease service delivery, provide guidance on how to maintain treatment gains, and revaluate once the pandemic subsides
Can the most important services continue without in person contact?
No
Yes
Why?
Engage in the following steps:
1. Discuss potential remote options (e.g., supervision, parent training) with client or client's parents or guardians
2. Describe strengths and weaknesses of each option
3. Provide possible services without in person contact
4. Operate within scope of competence and scope of practice; Improve competence in remote delivery
5. Use the process of evidence-based practice to inform decision-making
6. Regularly re-assess risk and a possible transition back to in person services
Client currently presents, OR skill regression may lead to immediate risk of severe harm to client or community
Technology not available for telehealth/telephonic services
Have you 1) reviewed with the client's or their parents or guardians the risks to the client, the family, and the broader community that are associated with continued in person service delivery, and 2) reviewed risks with all staff involved, and confirmed staff have not, or will not, be exposed to others with health concerns?
Place services on temporary hold while the infrastructure is established for telehealth/telephonic services
No
Yes
Inform all parties of the risks of in person service delivery; re-evaluate preference for continued in person services for all parties
If all parties consent to in person services, and haven't or won't be exposed to others who are ill, establish a process for continuous risk assessment and evaluation

Additional Steps of BSA

- Implement the system
- Evaluate the system
- Revise until you reach performance objectives

Responding to Criticism

- Some have argued
  - the proposed decision-making algorithm promotes client abandonment
  - we fail to consider the role of families in the decision-making process
  - we do not consider the risks associated with skill regression

Summary

(this slide is intentionally left blank)

Contact

- Matt Brodhead
  - mtb@msu.edu

- Visit www.mattbrodhead.com