

# Disconnecting Positive Psychology and OBM

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper responds to the article by Wiegand and Geller which advocates broadening the content of OBM by assimilating content from non-behavioral psychologies. I argue that these psychologies have theories and aims so incompatible with OBM that no added value will be obtained by forming an interconnection. Specific problems with positive psychology and personality psychology include mentalistic approaches to the subject matter and the absence of a focus on improving organizational results. I suggest instead that we draw on newer behavioral concepts and theories as well as compatible non-mentalistic theories such as systems models for content that will expand the conceptual base of OBM. I also suggest that a wider audience for OBM can be obtained through forging links with performance-oriented fields such as Human Performance Technology. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** Organizational Behavior Management, positive psychology, human performance technology

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67

Wiegand and Geller's paper in this issue urges us to consider the merits of a recent movement called "positive psychology" as well as the study of the older field of achievement motivation and its attendant personality theories. As a faculty member in a Department of Behavior Analysis, I generally don't pay much attention to the latest fads in general psychology any more than I keep up with bandwagons in other social sciences (what, after all the benefits we got from postmodernism?) This is not because I am content with the state of progress in OBM. Like Geller, I, too, wish to broaden the scope and impact of OBM. But I do not think there is much that mainstream psychology, and least of all, personality psychology, has to offer OBM in helping OBM achieve its aims.

Aubrey Daniels often tells a story about his first organizational consulting effort. He met with a plant manager of a carpet mill and began to pitch his OBM services to the man. The manager stopped him partway through his pitch and said words to the effect of "Look, will this help me make more carpet? If it doesn't, I'm not interested in hearing about it." Aubrey said that jolted him into realizing exactly what his aim was. So, I ask the same of Wiegand and Geller—will any of this help us make more (or better) carpet? If that cannot be clearly demonstrated then there is not much added value for OBM of spending our time considering these theories and movements.

Why am I skeptical that positive psychology, I/O psychology, or personality psychology will add value to OBM? Just look at the definitions and content of these areas. Wiegand and Geller describe positive psychology as a science of subjective experience, individual traits and institutions that promise to improve quality of life for humankind. Several characteristics stand out: it is heavily focused on personal well-being; there is not a mention of anything like behavior; and certainly no focus on important accomplishments of a personal or organizational nature. Whatever positive psychology is out to achieve, it is a long way from helping plant managers make more carpet! Geller is free to spend his time tugging at the pants leg of positive psychology trying to convince its proponents that they ought to be including positive reinforcement to improve their movement. That has nothing to do with OBM. But if, in these times when we are re-examining the aims and scope of OBM, Geller wishes to argue that these fields can help OBM and that we should link up with them, I must decline the offer and urge others to do the same.

True, as Wiegand and Geller say, I/O psychology has a promotional edge over OBM. It is more firmly established and better marketed than

OBM I have no doubt. I don't believe that is because it offers a coherent set of principles for improving organizational effectiveness. I still read I/O psychology as a conglomeration of widely different topic areas and theories dealing with the general issue of the role of psychological variables in work settings. Sometimes that means useful ideas that end up helping organizations achieve their goals, but all too often it means the typical obsession with worker satisfaction, endless leadership models of one kind or another, research methodologies that consider surveys "hard data," and a lack of concern with improving organizational results. A case in point. I had a recent encounter with a doctoral student in an I/O program in which he described his dissertation research. His topic was how employee perceptions of "fit" with their jobs related to their attitudes to those jobs. No mention of behavior. No mention of organizational results. This might be perfectly acceptable I/O psychology, but it's just not about performance. It's about as closely related to the organizational bottom line as proper nutrition and snappy attire.

### ***PERSONALITY THEORIES***

What does personality theory have to offer OBM? Judging from Wiegand and Geller's description, nothing but mentalistic psychobabble. For those readers who missed the memo regarding mentalism and the behavioral orientation (see Skinner, 1938; 1953; 1963; 1974) let me briefly recount the main points. Explanations of behavior that identify the cause as some hypothetical internal variable (say, a "person state") are avoided because they throw in another level of variables that add no value other than the satisfaction brought about by having more psychological-sounding words in the explanation. Mentalism violates principles of parsimony, it focuses on relationships between poorly defined hypothetical entities instead of behavior, and it downplays or obscures the role of environmental variables. When mentalistic accounts finally admit environmental variables into the causal equations (as they must to say anything practical), it becomes apparent that the mentalistic variables were not needed in the first place.

Wiegand and Geller seem to buy into mentalism wholeheartedly, informing us, for example, that the point of research in one kind of personality theory is to "increase positive person states through environmental conditions and contingencies, which then affect a person's motivation orientation" (p. 15). A behavior analytic translation might be that environmental contingencies can increase the probability of behav-

iors that lead to successful outcomes. Nothing new here, except more useless mental waystations and psychospeak (“person states” which influence one’s “motivation orientation”) getting in the way of trying to identify the history and current environmental variables that make people emit success-producing behaviors.

Proof that the mentalistic elements add no value is provided by the authors themselves when they go on to summarize how we can increase the likelihood of achievement (oops, I left out the mentalistic waystation—*increase self-efficacy*, a belief said to increase the likelihood of achievement) by giving the person opportunities to experience success in a hierarchy of tasks ranging from easy to hard. Any decent behavior analyst would have suggested just the same and described it more simply by saying that one can use well-known principles of *shaping* to teach someone to persist in completing progressively difficult tasks. But that sounds too simple (and obvious), not like a *real* psychological theory. We also read that “a sense of personal mastery” boosts motivation to achieve success, and that one can increase the level of this mentalistic construct by, among other things, setting proper goals and arranging feedback on progress toward those goals. Mentalists don’t find it satisfying to simply say that goals and feedback strengthen behavior that achieves important outcomes. The constructs add nothing to the explanatory value of these accounts; one can delete the mentalistic elements and the functional relations between behavior, environment and outcome are there. You just have to wade through the—I’ll be polite here—“psychologizing” to find them.

To top off the package Wiegand and Geller are urging us to buy, we get the bonus usually thrown in by personality theory: the  $2 \times 2$  personality typology. People are labeled as being one of four types in the Atkinson model they describe. If popular appeal is what you want, these things are guaranteed winners because everyone likes playing the “which type am I?” game. The problem is that popular attraction to these models is governed by a host of variables that hardly qualify as logical or rational bases for belief. People often find specific features of themselves or their lives that fit a general description said to be of them, a phenomenon called *retrofitting* or the Barnum Effect. Concluding that the general description is accurate or valid simply on the basis of retrofitting has been called the *fallacy of personal validation* (Forer, 1949). Personal validation (together with historical and environmental variables of course) supports belief in the validity of horoscopes, psychic readings, and yes, personality tests (see Hyman, 1977; Shermer, 1997; Vyse, 1997). Anti-pseudoscience crusaders such as James Randi (1982)

and cold reading experts such as Ian Rowland (2001) have repeatedly demonstrated that the content of the horoscope or the personality category is irrelevant; if you provide the right context, people will fit themselves into any description given to them and conclude that the system allegedly responsible, whether that be astrology or a personality theory, is accurate and insightful. Compounding the fallacy, credulous client reactions often serve to reinforce the practitioner's belief and continued use of the techniques that appear to be accurate.

Academics surely rely on more substantial evidence to validate these personality models. On page 11 we see an example. Covington and Roberts (1994) *surveyed* undergraduates and *correlated* their typology with another personality test. The major data is once again self-report, the "hard data" of mainstream psychology, with correlations to other self-reports being used as evidence of validity. That's a long way from tracking behavior, and even further from personal accomplishments, and in no way related to results meaningful for the success of an organization. Personality theories don't help anyone make more carpet; they aren't focused on such bottom-line issues.

In fact, personality models may interfere with making more carpet. At present, many corporations invest time and money in using personality typologies like that in the ubiquitous Myers-Briggs Type Indicator because they (a) are stumped by persistent performance problems, and (b) are led to believe that "psychological" variables must be involved and (c) a personality inventory will help everyone understand each other's motives better, and (d) this will help everyone be more productive. Where is the Level 4 data validating this alleged causal chain? When point *a* above is observed, OBmers should try to convince managers to look to their performance infrastructure (their management practices, processes, training, measurement, feedback, compensation and reward systems) to address the problems directly. Personality typing is simply a distraction in the way of real performance consulting. It convinces the naïve that behavior is unchangeable, and that one should look to person-based variables for answers instead of performance systems. We know better than that. Let's not blend our performance-oriented approach with approaches that lack a track record or a proper methodology for improving bottom-line measures of organizational effectiveness, just so we can attract a wider audience. It's better to be effective first, popular second, not the other way around.

### **BROADENING OBM CONTENT AND GAINING A WIDER AUDIENCE**

I have argued in several venues that OBM needs to go beyond conventional applied behavior analysis theories and models to help us become more effective (Hyten, 2001; 2002; 2004a). I have suggested incorporating behavioral economic theories, newer behavioral concepts such as establishing operations (now called motivating operations) as well as systems models to grow our content. I am hardly alone in this effort. Hantula (in, e.g., Hantula, DiClemente, & Rajala, 2001) makes use of foraging theories in his research, Mawhinney (1992; 2001) advocates the underutilized concept of the metacontingency, and Hayes (this issue) suggests that Relational Frame Theory is pertinent to OBM, just to name a few examples. We have plenty of behavior analytic content as well as non-mentalistic compatible content to grow OBM without drifting away from our distinctive approach.

In an online issue of the OBM Newsletter, I also suggested a strategy for gaining OBM a wider audience (Hyten, 2004b). OBMers can contribute their expertise to the growing area called Human Performance Technology (HPT), promoted by the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI). HPT is a multidisciplinary enterprise dedicated to improving organizational results. Behavior analysis is explicitly acknowledged as one of the “foundation sciences” for this field in a recent white paper (ISPI Presidential Task Force, 2004). One can also find cognitively-oriented psychologists and instructional designers in this movement. But it is the focus on results that holds everyone’s feet to the fire. You can use various concepts to describe what you’re doing as long as you produce some actual improvement in organizational functioning. This tends to hold down the “psychologizing” to a tolerable level, unlike in mainstream psychology where there is no such criterion. Supporting HPT is our chance to participate in a truly relevant wider movement, and gain recognition for our field while contributing toward goals more consonant with our approach. I urge the OBM community to consider this connection and pull the plug on the connections advocated by Wiegand and Geller.

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