

## ABOUT PERSISTENT CONCEPTUAL CONFUSION: A RESPONSE TO O'HORA AND BARNES-HOLMES

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In my paper on *Instructions, Rules, and Abstraction: A Misconstrued Relation* (Ribes-Iñesta, 2000), I attempted to show that the concept of “rule” is not adequate to refer to behavioral or environmental events from a psychological perspective. Rules, if they have any meaning for psychology, may be conceived as synonyms for behavioral and/or environmental consistencies. To use “rule” as a *technical* term to describe or explain such consistencies entails severe theoretical risks. First, it confers stimulus properties to formal statements regarding consistencies in the environment and behavior, confounding *a priori* and *a posteriori* statements about consistencies with the consistencies themselves. Second, rules, contrary to what O’Hora and Barnes-Holmes advocate, are not descriptions. Rules are prescriptions, and prescriptions as in the case of instructions, are not related to the problem of reference. Even more, instructions and other kinds of prescriptions correspond to what Skinner labels as *mands* and not *tacts*, which ultimately are the kind of verbal responses concerned with the problem of reference and of “rule.” *Mands* are verbal operants far removed from the type of control suggested by rules: *mands* are verbal operants directly controlled by their consequences. Third, if one identifies rules with consistencies in the environment and behavior, all schedule-controlled behavior might be considered as rule-governed behavior, demonstrating the fragility of “rule” as a technical term. Fourth, an extreme case exemplifying the inadequacy of the concept of “rule” involves those situations in which a “rule” consists of ruling out a behavior, as in prohibitions. Does the nonoccurrence of behaviors prohibited by a rule confirm its effectiveness? Any moment in which we do not kill would be taken as exemplifying rule-governed behavior! (P. Harzem, personal communication, February 23, 1996).

There are several misunderstandings or misquotations in O’Hora and Barnes-Holmes’ reply. Let me examine a few of them:

1) O’Hora and Barnes-Holmes state that “Ribes-Iñesta does not address the referential or specifying nature of rules and, consequently, fails to provide useful definitions of rules as either verbal stimuli or responses” (2001, p. 21). On one hand, specifying is not the same as referring. In fact, specifying means to state explicitly or to include details in a statement. The specification of contingencies assumed to

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characterize rules does not necessarily entail referential functions, and if this were the case, we would talk of descriptions, narrations, and similar terms, instead of rules. On the other hand, it is not my intention to provide a definition of rules as stimuli or responses, because what I am attempting is precisely to show the logical and empirical problems entailed in the use of “rule” as a psychological, technical term.

2) O’Hora and Barnes-Holmes mention that I conceive “rules . . . constructed as verbal stimuli that describe consequences” (2001, p. 21). What I wrote referred to “rules . . . constructed as verbal stimuli that describe *contingencies*” (2000, p. 44), and to me (Ribes, 1997a), at least, consequences and contingencies are not the same.

3) I am asked to “distinguish between rules and other stimuli that have similar effects (e.g., discriminative stimuli, conditional stimuli)” (O’Hora & Barnes-Holmes, 2001, p. 24). This is a curious query. Is it not suggestive of the semantic and logical problems of the term “rule” that other stimuli might have similar effects? Why should I have to make a distinction between rules and discriminative stimuli if the definition itself of rules considers them as verbal discriminative stimuli? The concept of stimulus is one of the ill-defined concepts of operant theory and some distinctions as those established between rules, discriminative, and conditional stimuli are difficult to sustain on logical and empirical bases (Ribes, 1997b).

4) O’Hora and Barnes-Holmes point out that I do “not suggest a history of reinforcement that would give rise to such performances [prompted by instructions] and thus his treatment of instructions falls short of a complete functional-analytic definition”(2001, p. 24). Instructions refer to formal properties of some verbal stimuli or responses. Skinner (1957) examined them in the context of *mands* and of *supplementary stimuli (prompts)*. The literature on developmental retardation is rich in examples of how to establish “instructional control,” both on verbal and nonverbal performances, without appealing to a “referential history” of the “verbal stimuli” included in the instructions. Instructions *per se* do not constitute a functional class of verbal stimuli or responses. The use of terms such as “instructions” only reveals the logical weakness of concepts being used in operant or behavior-analytic theory. The extended use of criteria implicit in studying instructions would lead us to postulate a variety of verbal behavior events and variables related to formal descriptions of language, something equivalent to the *botanization* of verbal or linguistic behavior.

As a final comment, I would like to stress three things. First, “rules,” “instructions,” and similar terms are not technical terms and induce confusion. Second, the use of these terms originates as a consequence of the operation-based strategy that characterizes behavior analysis and operant “theory.” Terms such as “rules” and “instructions” are not theoretically grounded. They have emerged as operational or hermeneutic devices compensating for the lack of consistent theoretical criteria. Third, *Verbal Behavior* (Skinner, 1957) cannot provide the theoretical grounds for studying human behavior. As I have already shown (Ribes, 1996, 1999), Skinner’s (1957) treatment of verbal behavior is based upon violations, contradictions, and insufficiencies of concepts and criteria previously developed for simple and repetitive animal behavior. It is imperative to revisit the assumptions and “principles” upon which research on human behavior is based. Otherwise, behaviorists will continue arguing about misunderstandings and ill-defined concepts.

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