

Organizational Behavior Management and Personality Psychology: Reunited and It Feels So Good?

Brent W. Roberts

ABSTRACT. I make four points in this commentary on Geller (2002). First, the models put forward by Geller are excellent examples of the direction Organizational Behavior Management (OBM) should take in the near future. Second, these models are too modest. Findings establishing the role of genetics and their phenotypic expression—traits—are overtaking the field of psychology in general and will soon overtake OBM. Third, behaviorism should not die as a field of inquiry in psychology or in particular domains such as organizational psychology. One example is given for how a successful merger could take place. Fourth and finally, OBM should merge with I/O Psychology and dissolve arbitrary barriers to the benefit of both OBM and I/O Psychology. [*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> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.*]

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Brent W. Roberts is affiliated with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Address correspondence to: Brent W. Roberts, Department of Psychology, University of Illinois, 603 East Daniel Street, Champaign, IL 61820 (E-mail: broberts@s.psych.uiuc.edu).

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It is ironic that a personality psychologist has been given the opportunity to comment on this series of articles entertaining the idea of opening the field of Organizational Behavior Management (OBM) to other models of human nature beyond behaviorism. This irony stems from the fact that many of my colleagues believe that the nadir of the field of personality psychology resulted from the effect of radical behaviorism on the mindset of psychologists in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Hogan, 2002; Hogan & Roberts, 2001). During this period of time it was generally accepted that the idea of consistent human behavior embodied in the notion of a trait was intellectually indefensible and socially unpalatable and that situations and their respective contingencies were responsible for every day behavior (Mischel, 1968). In the subsequent period personality psychology bottomed out, its relevance to the field significantly diminished by the influence of behaviorism. In response to the withering criticism, the field of personality psychology reformulated itself, expanding its theoretical and conceptual scope. It is no longer a field simply dominated by trait models and trait measures. It now encompasses such diverse topics as goals and motivation, behavior genetics, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, and personality development (see Plomin & John, 1999). Now, not only has personality psychology made a come back, it is shaping the dialogue within other fields such as I/O Psychology (B. Roberts & Hogan, 2001) and in clinical psychology (Harkness & Lilienfeld, 1997). It seems that OBM is considering a similar move to expand its scope. If the experience of personality psychology is any indicator, it is a wise move.

In this commentary I briefly review the target articles and provide additional evidence for why OBM should move to a broader conceptualization of human nature as a model to guide research and intervention. Second, I make the argument that traditional trait personality psychology could be improved if it successfully incorporated some behavioral ideas. Third, and finally, I address the notion that OBM is a distinct field from I/O Psychology.

ON THE OPENING UP OF OBM TO ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF HUMAN NATURE

It is quite refreshing to see the authors of these target articles considering the possibility of opening up their field to new ideas. Geller (2002; as well as S. Roberts, 2002) makes convincing arguments that OBM should open itself up to innovations and findings from fields such as personality and social psychology. The key to whether OBM should broaden its perspective rides on whether the typical OBM-trained psychologists sees it as necessary to infer that people exhibit behaviors that are not directly under the control of a given

discriminative stimulus. That is, people come to the situation with their own agenda, conscious or unconscious, and this agenda will guide how they interpret and respond to environmental contingencies. Put more simply, is there anything in the individual that we as scientists and practitioners must pay attention to? There remains in mainstream OBM the typical behaviorist assumption that to control behavior we need only to pay attention to environmental stimuli, not what is inside the person. Geller (2002) makes convincing arguments that individual differences in emotional states and cognitive sets moderate the effectiveness of typical OBM interventions. I have no substantive quibbles with the particularities of their models.

I do, on the other hand believe that they do not go far enough, for there is now compelling evidence from many different fields that human beings are not blank slates (Pinker, 2002). It seems clear that individual differences in emotional states and cognitive mindsets can and do affect the nature of human learning, or more specifically, the efficacy of behavioral interventions. It seems eminently reasonable to expand the scope of OBM to include personality states and the social cognitive constructs described by Geller. From the perspective of a personality psychologist, these are conservative proposals that invoke personality with a small "p." That is to say, there are much more provocative ideas and constructs within personality psychology, namely traits and their constituent mechanisms, that are not incorporated into these models.

For example, from the field of personality development there is now indisputable evidence that in terms of personality traits people are quite consistent over time and across age (B. Roberts & Delvecchio, 2000). Specifically, personality traits in adulthood reach levels of stability remarkably close to the upper limits of reliability (e.g., .75) over nontrivial time periods like 10 years. Remarkably, personality trait consistency in adolescence and young adulthood is not much lower (e.g., .50 to .60). In addition, we now know that up to 50% of the variability in human behavior can be linked to genetic factors (for a review see Plomin & Caspi, 1999), including such provocative traits as antisocial behavior, or what some might consider moral character (Rhee & Waldman, 2002). Moreover, several studies now show that the majority of behavioral consistency over time is genetic in origin (Eley, Lichtenstein, & Moffitt, in press; McGue, Bacon, & Lykken, 1993). This finding undermines the idea that environments are the sole facilitators of behavioral consistency. If this is not sufficient to convince the skeptical behaviorist, there is now evidence for the first gene by environment interaction on adolescent and adult delinquent behavior (Caspi, McClay, Moffitt, Mill, Martin, Craig, Taylor, & Poulton, 2002). Specifically, Caspi et al. (2002) showed that a gene that affects synthesis of MAO neurotransmitters is a protective factor for children exposed to abuse. Typically, children who are abused grow up to commit greater levels of delin-

quent acts than their peers. The presence of the MAO gene buffered the effect of abuse, such that boys with the gene looked surprisingly like boys who experienced no abuse on a battery of psychological and behavioral indicators of delinquency. Put in behavioral terms, this gene prevents certain individuals from “learning” that abuse and its commensurate behaviors, such as delinquency and violence, are appropriate.

Moreover, we are now finding through meta-analyses and more carefully performed studies that personality traits predict a host of important life outcomes, such as career success (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999), job performance (Tett, Jackson, & Rothstein, 1991; Hogan, Rybicki, Motowidlo, & Borman, 1998), leadership (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002), marital stability (Cramer, 1993; Kelly & Conley, 1987), marital satisfaction (Robins, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2000), religious participation (MacDonald, 2000), positive health behaviors (Caspi, Begg, Dickson, Harrington, Langley, Moffitt, & Silva, 1997), and even longevity (Friedman, Tucker, Tomlinson-Keasey, Schwartz, Wingard, & Criqui, 1993). That is to say, personality traits predict success in love and work, and a long and healthy life.

More importantly, researchers have begun to identify the mechanisms through which personality traits act on the environment, further dispelling the myth that what is inside does not count. The first mechanism, described as reactance (Caspi & B. Roberts, 1999) reflects the fact that people have anticipatory attitudes that lead them to project particular interpretations onto new social relationships and situations (Rusting, 1998). Specifically, people are prone to assimilate experience that is consistent with their self-perceptions (Block, 1982; Brandstadter & Greve, 1994). This is accomplished through a variety of informational processes in which the person interprets new events in a manner that is consistent with his or her experientially-established understanding of self and others. Individuals thus elicit and selectively attend to information that confirms rather than disconfirms their self-conceptions (Snyder & Ickes, 1985). In behavioral terms this means that if a person does not find a discriminative stimulus or reward relevant it will not be registered and it will, therefore, not be effective. From an OBM perspective this would indicate that individual differences in terms of personality traits and motives should moderate the effectiveness of reward systems. This is very much like Malott's (2002) point that some of us have a symbolic Jewish mother taking up residence in the attic of our minds who effectively nullifies the reinforcing nature of success. Rewarding the behavior of people with a willful Jewish mother does not induce a change in their behavioral repertoire, though it might for those who lack a Jewish mother. Moreover, the Jewish mother goes with people from situation to situation.

Another mechanism that reflects the active role people play in shaping their environment is that people evoke changes in the environment because of their unique personality characteristics. The person acts; the environment reacts; and the person reacts back in mutually interlocking evocative transaction. For example, very early in life, children evoke consistent responses from their social environment that affect their subsequent interactions with adults and peers (Bell & Chapman, 1986; Zeskind & Collins, 1987). Moreover, simple physical traits, such as smiling when your picture was taken in college, have been shown to predict numerous important life outcomes 30 years later in life, such as marital satisfaction and psychological well-being (Harker & Keltner, 2001). Thus, people create new environments that have a tendency to reward their existing personality traits because of the personality traits they bring to the environment. This fit between a person's pre-existing traits and the environments they enter into and create accounts, in part, for the stability seen in personality traits over time (B. Roberts & Robins, in press).

Finally, a strict behavioral perspective often circumvents the existence of "teleological" constructs, such as goals and motivations, which we have been described as proactive selection mechanisms (Caspi & B. Roberts, 1999). We now know that people actively select environments based on their goals and personality traits (Ickes, Snyder, & Garcia, 1997). This proactive transactional process was documented in a 50-year longitudinal study of political attitudes. The political liberalism acquired by women while in college in the 1930s was sustained across their life course in part because they selected liberal friends and husbands who continued to support their politically liberal attitudes (Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991).

So, in addition to the arguments made by Geller (2002), I would include the additional points that much of what is seen as consistent behavior, and classically thought to be under the control of the environment, is actually linked to genetic factors. This does not diminish the importance of the environment; in fact it makes understanding the environment even more important (see Caspi et al., 2002). What it does do is eliminate the untested assumption that continuity and change in behavior can be explained entirely by environmental conditions alone (e.g., Lewis, 2001). It cannot. Moreover, there is now accumulating evidence that personality traits predict numerous outcomes of social significance. Finally, there are a number of mechanisms, reaction, evocation, and selection that demonstrate the ways in which personality traits within individuals act on environments. It is difficult in the face of these results and those cited by Geller (2002) and S. Roberts (2002) to continue to believe that individuals are passive recipients of the influence of the environment, which is implicit in the classic OBM perspective (Johnson, Mawhinney, & Redmon, 2001). It is time

for OBM practitioners to heed the call from Geller (2002) and do more than simply reward behavior.

REASONS TO RETAIN BEHAVIORAL IDEAS IN OBM AND I/O PSYCHOLOGY

Some psychologists have claimed that the behavioral movement and model is dead (Hogan, 2002) in large part because the behavioral model does not sufficiently account for human behavior. In its place, it seems a strong trait model is gaining prominence, especially in fields like I/O Psychology. As Geller (2002) writes, “it seems many I/O psychologists believe the key to improving work performance and the quality of work-life is selecting the right people for the job assignment rather than intervening to improve the ongoing behaviors of people already on the job.” Clearly, the main way in which personality psychology has influenced I/O Psychology is by providing new and different dimensions on which to select individuals. What most I/O psychologists miss, and for that matter many personality psychologists, is that personality traits, though stable, do show systematic changes throughout the life course (B. Roberts, Helson, & Klohnen, 2002; B. Roberts, Robins, Caspi, & Trzesniewski, in press). In fact, we now have good evidence that personality traits change because of work experiences (B. Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, in press; B. Roberts, 1997).¹

Most trait oriented psychologists and I/O practitioners have no way of explaining this fact or accounting for it in their typical selection approach to dealing with organizational issues. One particular reason to retain behavioral models is that they constitute the most elegant and compelling explanation for why personality traits and other psychological characteristics change over time (Caspi & B. Roberts, 1999). In this insight I see opportunity for both OBM and personality psychology. Typically, OBM interventions focus on changing behavior. Well why not focus on changing both behavior and traits? For example, if one combines the idea of shaping behavior with Geller’s (2002) idea of mindfulness, we are two-thirds of the way to the definition of a trait (e.g., enduring behaviors, thoughts, and feelings). If behavioral interventions can be used to shape behaviors and thoughts, and eventually the emotions that go with them, this complex set of behaviors, cognitions, and feelings becomes self-reinforcing and self-governing—effectively placing the control of behavior in the individual and not in the environment and, therefore, facilitates better longer term outcomes (Geller, 2002).

I see three advantages of broadening the agenda for behavioral interventions to include traits. First, we already know that changing immediate behav-

ior and cognition patterns is itself related to many positive outcomes. Second, if we can change a person's trait-like patterns then we have made a long-term investment in positive change. This brings to mind the oft-quoted biblical allusion to the fact that if you give people fish you feed them for a day, but if you teach them how to fish, you feed them for life. Personality traits are analogous to learning how to fish, as they go with the person into new situations and have cascade effects on life experiences and outcomes. Therefore, even small changes in personality traits may have profound effects on significant issues for individuals. Third, if it is shown that we can change personality traits through behavioral interventions, this provides compelling evidence against a simplistic trait model of human nature, which many fields, such as I/O Psychology, are in danger of adopting despite evidence to the contrary. A dispassionate analysis of the data shows that neither the extreme behavioral nor trait models are sufficient explanations of human nature (B. Roberts & Caspi, 2001).

SHOULD OBM BECOME LIKE I/O?

One of the putative reasons for the move to expand the scope of OBM is the apparent success of I/O programs and the withering on the vine of OBM programs. The continuation of the field of OBM as a field distinct from I/O is predicated on a few myths that should be dispelled. First, although selection is often a major focus of I/O, it is not the only focus. Training and development are key aspects of I/O Psychology and many I/O programs. In fact, training texts systematically present behavioral models and interventions (e.g., Goldstein & Ford, 2002). Moreover, the blend of behavioral and social cognitive models typically found in training texts and research in I/O Psychology looks very similar to Geller's (2002) approach. Plus ca la change, plus ca la meme chose.

Second, given the fact that typical I/O training programs subsume behavioral models, the assumption that "OBM holds the keys to greater beneficial change than I/O Psychology" (Geller, 2002) is questionable. What does it offer that I/O doesn't already have? If one persists in the belief that pure behavioral interventions are better than other types of training and development there is a strong warning from clinical psychology. Decades of research pitting behavioral models against cognitive and reflective therapeutic interventions have resulted in the almost unqualified conclusion that there is no discernable difference between different types of interventions (Wampold, Mondin, Moody, Stich, Benson, & Ahn, 1997). A conservative hypothesis would be behavioral models will do no better than the alternatives in applied settings. If OBM practitioners believe otherwise, it is incumbent on them to demonstrate the efficacy of their interventions above and beyond other types of training in-

terventions found in I/O Psychology. But be forewarned, the effect sizes differentiating behavioral interventions from the alternatives will be small.

I cannot help but believe that the division between OBM and I/O reflects an ideological hangover. For a time behaviorism ruled in psychology and it was natural to apply behavioral principles to organizations and individuals who worked for those organizations. At this stage of the field of psychology and I/O Psychology in particular, it is nonsensical for OBM to continue as a distinct area with its own journals, which reflect ideology more than current practice (Ones & Viswesvaran, 2002). The danger of continuing the division can be put in behavioral terms. By maintaining separate journals, the field of OBM runs the risk of deceiving itself with a reward system that has little meaning. If only OBM scientists and practitioners are reading OBM journals and the field of OBM is getting smaller by the day, you are receiving rewards in the form of publications as the ship is sinking.

OBM has a lot to offer I/O Psychology. The rigor of thought and method of typical OBM interventions are invaluable scientific tools for any field. It seems senseless to try and compete with a field that is not really different, unless one persists in the antiquated notion that radical behaviorism is sufficient and will eventually make a come back through some new marketing ploy. The target articles in this special issue provide cogent arguments for why that notion is false. The experience of personality psychologists who have gone through similar transitions also would argue against division. By expanding OBM to include personality constructs and many of the classic social and social cognitive constructs, it becomes essentially the same thing as I/O Psychology. Why make the distinction?

CONCLUSION

To summarize, I have made four points in this commentary. First, the models put forward by Geller (2002) and S. Roberts (2002) are excellent examples of the direction OBM should take in the near future. Second, these models are too modest. Findings establishing the role of genetics and their phenotypic expression—traits—have provided definitive evidence that as psychologists we need to look beyond the environment to the person to fully understand behavior. Third, behaviorism should not die. It can be a vital part of any model of human nature. Fourth and finally, OBM should merge with I/O Psychology and dissolve arbitrary barriers to the benefit of both OBM and I/O Psychology.

The remaining commentators who are from the guild of OBM argue that no change is necessary. Rather, OBM must market itself better (Boyce, 2002; Pounds, 2002) or OBM training should teach students to be more humble

(Pounds, 2002). It is not a marketing or training issue. It is a behavioral issue. The practitioners of OBM need to change their behavior by opening their research and applied practices up to those nefarious “mentalistic” concepts proposed by Geller (2002). To continue to assert “behavior is a function of the environment” *only* (Boyce, 2002) is the height of intellectual hubris in the face of the now irrefutable evidence that nonenvironmental factors also affect behavior.

One reason for the continued decline of behaviorism is that most psychologists have been convinced that radical behaviorism is an impoverished and inadequate theory of human nature. This does not mean that most theoretical propositions derived from behaviorism are wrong. To the contrary, most if not all of the propositions are correct. They just don’t explain everything about human behavior. In order for behaviorism to survive it is incumbent on scientists and practitioners who understand behaviorism to adapt. My fear is these constituencies will not adapt and behaviorism will die out through lack of institutional support. This would be tragic, as we would then be forced to “rediscover” behaviorism some decades in the future, which would be a clear waste of intellectual resources. On the other hand, wouldn’t it be ironic, after all is said and done, if behaviorism died out as a focus of intellectual inquiry because behaviorists refused to change their own behavior?

NOTE

1. Although this may appear to contradict the earlier claims that personality traits are stable, it does not. Change or its converse, stability, can be indexed through a number of different statistical techniques, such as test-retest correlations, profile correlations, mean-level changes over time, and individual-level changes over time. It turns out that each of these indices taps a different type of change and that they are often independent of one another (see Caspi & Roberts, 1999, for a review). So, for example, rank-order stability and mean-level change can be completely independent (a group of individuals retains the same rank order on an attribute and all persons increase on that same attribute). The picture emerging from personality development research, especially in adulthood, reveals remarkable levels of rank-order stability, modest mean-level changes, and small, but meaningful individual-level changes that can be linked to life experiences (B. Roberts et al., in press).

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