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Association for Behavior Analysis International

EDITORIAL

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The Future of Verbal Behavior: Collaboration and Inclusivity

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Abstract

As a member of the incoming editorial team, I have been asked to speak to the future of verbal behavior research and of *The Analysis of Verbal Behavior*, considering questions about the direction of the field, the future path of the journal, and the message I would have for the next generation of researchers. In considering these questions, I propose that we ground strategic decision-making processes in values of collaboration and inclusivity, toward valued outcomes that include diversity and innovation, which I see as necessary for improving both practice and conceptual understanding, the traditionally stated aims of this community.

Keywords Verbal behavior · Values · Scientific culture

Over 60 years have passed since the publication of *Verbal Behavior*, and *The Analysis of Verbal Behavior* (TAVB) has been in existence for more than half of that time. A common task in the history of this journal has been to take stock—some of the first articles were reference lists (e.g., Sundberg & Partington, 1982, 1983), identifying publications and presentations that had used Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior, and charting the growth in those publications. Twenty years ago, TAVB partially dedicated a special issue considering the status and future of verbal behavior research, and the editorial team today has been asked to consider the same kinds of questions as we look ahead to the future: Where do we see the field moving over the next decade? What messages do we have for the next generation of researchers? What do we see as the future for TAVB itself—how might the journal look different from the past as the field grows, and what should make TAVB the first choice for authors engaged in verbal behavior research?

TAVB is the reflection and product of a particular scientific culture: the work of a community of researchers and scientist-practitioners who share a common goal of promoting effective behavior-analytic practice, specifically with respect to a behavioral

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analysis of language. I "grew up" as a behavior analyst within this community in the late 1990s, and TAVB was an important part of the shaping of my views and my career. The culture of TAVB, like all cultural practices, is founded on and will grow from a particular set of values, toward a particular set of aims, and I am honored to now be a part of shaping that culture. In articulating a vision for the future, we will need to come to some agreement on values related to process and outcomes, as well as determine strategies that will most likely lead to those valued outcomes, and as an editorial team, we will be working together to come to a common vision and mission. In this paper, though, I will speak to my own vision for the future of verbal behavior research and the future of TAVB. This stems from both my own personal values and history (including many conversations over the years with brilliant behavior analysts who share my interest in the future of the field), as well as what I have seen in the pages of this journal (i.e., the history of publications in TAVB that speak to the values of the journal and its editors over time).

I personally envision a future for this journal and for the verbal behavior community that grounds strategic decision-making processes in values of collaboration and inclusivity, toward valued outcomes that include diversity and innovation, which I see as necessary for improving both practice and conceptual understanding, the traditionally stated aims of this community (e.g., see the stated aims of the Verbal Behavior Special Interest Group; VB SIG, n.d.). In the absence of work that is purposeful in reflecting these values, we risk—and I would suggest that we already see—increased fragmentation, a narrowing of scope, and a focus on sharpening the distinctions between groups in an effort to "win" in some sort of winner-takes-all fight for the survival of our culture and community. If there has been a slowing of progress in research on verbal behavior, I suggest that a lack of clarity about our common values and common goals may be a contributing factor. However, I also believe that we can grow through the divisions we might currently see, and I believe that the values I am suggesting we base our growth on are not new to this community—we need only be clear in using them to more explicitly ground our work and our determination of desired outcomes and strategies as we move forward.

Collaboration

TAVB has always had a stated aim of connecting members of our community (students, researchers, and practitioners) to each other, and we can see in its publication practices evidence also of a value of fostering open dialog aimed at improving conceptual analyses. Early articles on major conceptual issues were followed by responses from other researchers, as well as replies to those responses (e.g., on rule-governed behavior; Catania, 1989; Glenn, 1987, 1989). Knapp (1998) noted that many of the commentaries found in TAVB in its first two decades spoke to then (and still) unresolved and fundamental issues (as in discussions of naming and relational frame theory [RFT]; see Gross & Fox, 2009) and further suggested that the format of a focus or target article with commentary is so invaluable that comprehensive reviews and conceptual papers on major topics should perhaps never be published absent such academic dialog. We have added a statement to the mission of TAVB to recognize this as an explicit aim—to foster dialog between and among research scientists and scientist-practitioners. I hope that the pages of TAVB will host many such academic conversations in the future.

We must do more than simply publish debates on analyses and approaches, though. To be collaborative will require us to invite and facilitate discussion, in an inclusive process that recruits from and actively supports diverse perspectives. We will need to maintain a focus on a broad and shared valued outcome of improving understanding and practice, rather than competing for one perspective to win. Behavior analysts are charged with collaborating with other professionals as part of our practice—and I suggest that we would do well to better understand collaborative and inclusive practices not only from the perspective of how we work with other clinical disciplines but also from the perspective of how we work with each other. An analysis of the verbal behavior that supports collaborative and inclusive practices would be an excellent conversation to have within this journal, and we have strong models and existing analyses to draw from in the wealth of existing research and recommendations of behavior analysts who seek to influence cultural practices (e.g., Biglan, 1995, 2015).

Inclusivity and Diversity

In our discussions as an editorial team, we have seen that we all clearly value diversity in a number of different forms: diversity of thought and conceptual analysis, as well as diversity in the populations and topics research examines, and diversity of authorship. In recognition of this as a guiding value, as we refine the stated mission of TAVB, we will be explicitly including statements with respect to valuing diverse perspectives on human language and its conceptual underpinnings, as well as contributions that represent the scope of the field and the breadth of the populations we serve. I think it is in this recognition and valuing of diversity that the future of TAVB will look most different from the past. As a small example with respect to diversity of topics, we have added "derived relational responding" to the list of topics the journal encourages, but I would suggest that we look outside our own traditional scope of practice to consider other areas of language research that may have been somewhat neglected, and we must take a look at the diversity of our research participants and the populations we draw from. We may not know yet what we do not know—but staying grounded in values of collaboration and inclusivity should lead us to some strategies that will help us find out what we may be neglecting. A good place to start on this may be in outreach to the small but growing community of speech-language pathologists who are also Board Certified Behavior Analysts, but as I will note further, it will take outreach and collaboration with many different disciplines to represent the scope of research and practice that is possible if we consider our broad subject matter to be human language.

I also strongly believe that having a diverse authorship that is inclusive of traditionally underrepresented groups is an important goal in and of itself that arises from values of equity and inclusivity. This includes diversity in terms of those critical categories most often and immediately thought of when discussions of diversity appear—gender, sexual orientation, race, national origin, and so on—but also more subtle issues of diversity within scientific communities, such as representation of both "boots on the ground" clinicians and research scientists. We as an editorial team will be working hard to examine the barriers to publication in the pages of TAVB in an effort to create inclusive practices that increase diversity of all kinds.

Innovation

TAVB was begun as the newsletter of the VB SIG, back in 1982, when the traditional outlets for dissemination (the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* and the *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*) were not interested in the exploratory work being done by behavior analysts first beginning to apply Skinner's conceptualization of verbal behavior to real-world problems (Sundberg, 2014). Thus, from its inception, the journal has specifically valued contributions that were innovative and furthered the conceptual analysis of verbal behavior, over those that merely conformed to methodological expectations (Knapp, 1998). This aligns as well with Miguel's (2011) editorial vision of TAVB as "a vehicle for the publication of innovative methodologies, new conceptual analyses, and critical reviews that could establish new lines of inquiry. .. the testing ground for new and exciting ways to study 'language and cognition'" (p. 1). In line with both this history and our own vision, as our incoming editorial team works on crafting a mission statement for this journal, we have identified that TAVB should support not only dissemination generally but also the dissemination of *innovative* research and conceptual analyses. We can see how this aim links back to foundational values of inclusivity and diversity as well—innovation will be fostered by increasing diversity, and it will be the task of our editorial team to collaboratively determine strategies and tactics for doing so.

Improved Conceptual Understanding

The academic dialog present in earlier iterations of TAVB reflected the emergence of a variety of other "specialties" within the field of the analysis of verbal behavior (Hall, 1998), particularly with respect to conceptual analyses, including stimulus equivalence, direct instruction, and RFT. In 1998, Hall suggested that the way forward was through synthesis—that we should seek to join these disparate specialty areas under one conceptual umbrella. Twenty years on, however, it seems that researchers in these areas have split even further with respect to conceptual analyses. This may be due in part to some subtle but fundamental philosophical differences.

The grounding philosophy of TAVB, which is evident throughout its history (e.g., Leigland, 1989), is explicitly radical (vs. methodological) behavior analysis. Leigland suggests that "radical behaviorism, as a natural science 'system,' is inextricably linked to the functional analysis of verbal behavior, and it is only through an appreciation of the implications of the former will a 'science of verbal behavior' be fully underway" (p. 40). Just as radical behaviorism and Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior are interdependent, so too are functional contextualism and RFT (Ruiz & Roche, 2007). The differences in these two philosophies are subtle but important—Ruiz and Roche (2007) have suggested that this "epistemological gulf" (p. 8) has contributed to the rift that has arisen between the RFT and the behavior-analytic communities. Although far beyond the scope of this brief editorial, I would love to see a future discussion within this journal looking at the verbal behavior of verbal behavior researchers, examining and clarifying any such fundamental philosophical differences, as well as other differences in values and goals, and how those might impact both

practical applications and the ability to have meaningful dialog. It may be that with further clarification, we find true common ground and move forward on that foundation. Or, at this point, we may be faced with such foundational differences, even if subtle, that it is not fruitful to try to synthesize at the level of philosophy. However, there are significant commonalities in these two foundational philosophies—both involve a selectionistic paradigm, grounded in an analysis of verbal behavior as it is influenced by environmental variables, that is, a broadly contextualist approach, and with a broadly pragmatic goal orientation. So for me, a question arises—do we need a synthesis to improve our conceptual understanding, or can TAVB, at this point in the trajectory of the field, function as a larger container to disseminate work of all kinds that utilizes a broadly functional analysis of language as behavior? If we value innovation and diversity, I think this is in fact a critical function of the journal. And so, in service of the aim of improving our conceptual understanding of verbal behavior, I believe we must diverge from the stated mission of the VB SIG, which has explicitly been to support the advancement of verbal behavior research as conceptualized and defined by Skinner (VB SIG, n.d.). Instead, as discussed previously, we must explicitly value a diversity of conceptual perspectives within the broad subject matter of a behavioral science of language.

Improved Practice

Our aim to improve conceptual understanding, as well as the utility of choosing values of inclusivity and collaboration as a framework for action, should be evaluated in conjunction with the ultimate aim of research and dissemination in applied sciences— to influence and improve practice. There are numerous issues to examine with respect to improving practice, which has always been an aim of TAVB. Among the issues particularly relevant to decisions made with respect to the future of TAVB is the question of why the empirical research (or conceptual analyses) presented here may not always be taken up by practitioners in the field. A gap between research and practice is evident in many—perhaps all—fields of applied science. If we have an aim of publishing innovative work, we must also consider what will lead to adopting research-based innovations. To this end, we would do well to consider research that has been done both within our own field (such as in special education, e.g., Greenwood & Abbott, 2001, and positive behavior supports, e.g., Carr et al., 1999) and outside our field, looking to the research in dissemination and implementation science, as well as other fields such as nursing and mental health, for guidance. For example, Carnine (1997) identified three qualities of research that are likely to lead to adoption in practice: trustworthiness, usability, and accessibility. As another example, the "diffusion of innovation model" suggests that characteristics of research that make adoption more likely include relative advantage, compatibility, and complexity (Dingfelder & Mandell, 2011). We may wish to consider these qualities both as we evaluate the quality of research submitted to the journal and in how we might improve the conditions for these qualities of research. I would also like to see in these pages an analysis of the research-to-practice gap with respect to research on verbal behavior, from the perspective of an analysis of verbal behavior.

In looking to improve practices while embracing a diversity of theoretical and conceptual analyses, it may also be fruitful to look for common ground in how different areas of verbal behavior research might map onto one another in application. It is likely here that we have the clearest alignment of goals, and the best chance of research progressing more quickly—if we can stay rooted in our shared values and aims. In applied work, our focus as behavior analysts is necessarily on socially valid outcomes in terms of behavior change. As an example, in my own work in early language development, I specify my overarching goal as establishing flexible, generative verbal behavior—and will therefore use whatever analysis (or procedures derived from a given analysis) will allow me to effect behavior change efficiently and with generality and generativity. In the case of my work in early intervention, it is in fact a combination, if not a true synthesis, of approaches that I use. I look to apply theory and research on how to best teach early verbal operant repertoires, which comes from the perspective of a strictly Skinnerian analysis of verbal behavior, along with theory and applied research from an RFT perspective on how to facilitate the emergence of derived relational responding. And, if I am working with relations of sameness, I see no reason not to use procedures that have arisen from the research done by theorists within the naming and stimulus equivalence traditions, whether or not I am in complete agreement with these conceptual analyses, if by doing so I can achieve the goals as I set out. However, it is only by deeply understanding each of these conceptual analyses that the practitioner will be able to see how research from these different perspectives might map onto one another in practice and then use the language and perspective that is most practical and useful within that particular moment. This broad and deep understanding is not only the foundation for my research and direct clinical work but also the foundation and focus of my training and coaching practice with students and behavior analysts. Thus I believe that any discussion of improving practice also requires a consideration of supervision and graduate training programs and how TAVB might impact the training of the next generation of researchers, as well as the next generation of practitioners.

TAVB has had an aim of contributing to the teaching of verbal behavior since the beginning (e.g., Johnson, 1982), and I certainly use classic articles from early issues in my own classes. As our mission acknowledges and values the diversity of conceptual perspectives, and the utility that such diversity affords, we will need to ensure that future issues of TAVB also contribute to the teaching of these perspectives. Our strategies with respect to the development of topics for special issues or with respect to recruiting tutorials and submissions from particular research areas or populations will need to be developed with this aim in mind.

We also might consider how we can influence graduate training programs and promote action in service of our stated values and aims. In valuing a broad scope of practice, I believe that we need to move outside the departments of applied behavior analysis and into the fields that we hope to influence. Rather than inviting lecturers on "outside topics" (environmental science, business, etc.) into our programs, how can we invite ourselves into their spaces? Our field is young, and behavior analysis departments have a critical function to teach theory and application. However, we cannot possibly teach to all of the areas of application that our science could influence, because the essential aim has been to influence all areas of human life—to "save the world with behavior analysis." If we are going to do this, we need to produce graduates who have a

deep enough theoretical understanding to move into any area of interest and apply behavior analysis to it as they go on to further study in that field. As behavior analysts, we also need to teach directly to students in those fields and both listen and speak to researchers in those fields—they already have the passion for their subject matter, and we can give them powerful tools with which to analyze and shape action within those fields, if we can listen to them and help identify what they need. I believe that an important measure of our success as a field will be when behavior analysis can be seen as a common approach from which an environmental policy advisor works, or a pediatrician, or a marketing director, rather than as an isolated specialty field. When it comes to the future of verbal behavior research and graduate training programs, we must work in true collaboration with other disciplines. In a wide variety of fields, language is a critical tool for intervention, and we have both a powerful framework for analysis and powerful tools for effecting change. Let us use them wisely, and widely.

Summary

I have chosen specific values and desired outcomes for the future of verbal behavior in this paper: collaboration, inclusivity, diversity, and innovation, as well as the aims of improving our conceptual analysis and practice. From a contextualist perspective, such values and outcomes cannot be judged in terms of being the "correct" ones—they are simply what I have assumed as my position and what I suggest our strategies and tactics should be evaluated against in terms of their success. For researchers who share the values and aims that I have presented here, TAVB should be their natural and first choice, and I am eager to help make it so. On those lines, my message to current and future researchers of verbal behavior is to be clear and stay grounded in your values as you determine your path of action. And, as Skinner is so often quoted as advising, "when you run onto something interesting, drop everything else and study it" (Skinner, 1956, p. 223)—more than anything else, I hope to see the results of that kind of open and passionate curiosity in the pages of TAVB throughout the years to come.

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