



The Future of Verbal Behavior: Together Is Better

Rocío Rosales¹

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Abstract

Prior editorials have addressed the question “Where do we go from here?” This is a reasonable query as an incoming editorial team considers new perspectives and initiatives that may further benefit the journal. I will address two important highlights of the revised mission statement of *The Analysis of Verbal Behavior* aimed at actively encouraging diversity of thought in publications and focusing on narrowing the gap between applied research and practice.

Keywords Research-to-practice gap · Verbal behavior · Diversity of thought

The Analysis of Verbal Behavior (TAVB) was first published in 1982 under the leadership of Mark Sundberg. It was originally designed as a newsletter for the Verbal Behavior Special Interest Group of the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAIA). Since that time, TAVB has maintained an important role within the field due to its publication of both conceptual articles and empirical demonstrations of the behavior-analytic account of human language. In recent years, the journal has benefited from a number of advancements, including growth in the number of published empirical articles (compared to nonempirical articles; Luke & Carr, 2015), availability of issues through PubMed Central (Miguel, 2011), partnership with the prominent publishing company Springer, publication of two issues per year, and publication of accepted manuscripts online before they appear in print (Petursdottir, 2014). These improvements are a direct result of the continued efforts of past TAVB editors who should be commended for their championing of the journal’s growth and visibility.

Prior TAVB editorials have addressed variations of the question “Where do we go from here?” (Miguel, 2011; Schlinger, 1998). This is a reasonable query as an incoming editorial team considers new perspectives and initiatives that may further benefit the journal. Miguel (2011) noted the need to encourage the study and publication of

✉ Rocío Rosales
rocio_rosales@uml.edu

¹ Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts Lowell, 113 Wilder Street, Suite 300, Lowell, MA 01854-3059, USA

manuscripts that highlighted complex verbal relations and to “use TAVB as a vehicle for the publication of innovative methodologies, new conceptual analyses, and critical reviews that could establish new lines of inquiry” (p. 1). This sentiment has been shared by others (Knapp, 1998) and continues to be something we will continue to strive for. In fact, one of the first initiatives of the current editorial team was to revise TAVB’s mission statement in order to encourage the diversity of thought and research in our field. Our aim is for TAVB to be a home for healthy discussion about the overlap and differences between the various conceptual analyses of the behavior-analytic account of language (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001; Horne & Lowe, 1996; Greer & Speckman, 2009; Sidman, 1994; Skinner, 1957). Behavior analysts are still the minority in psychology, and the number of researchers dedicated to the study of verbal behavior is relatively small. It seems that an inclusive approach that emphasizes critical discussion of theoretically diverse viewpoints would serve us well. It would allow us to present a unified front in an effort to disseminate our common empirical findings to a greater audience.

In an effort to promote dissemination of our science, ABAI recently launched a series of blogs (<https://science.abainternational.org/>). Two of these blogs are dedicated to the topic of verbal behavior (i.e., *Verbal Behavior Matters* and *Symbolic Language and Thought*). Although it is still too early to tell if these blogs are reaching a broad audience, the tone of the blog entries has been purposely written for a general audience. This was done in part to address the “marketing problem” of behavior analysis (Bailey, 1991). In fact, a recent demonstration clearly exposes the pitfalls of our vernacular (Critchfield, Becirevic, & Reed, 2017a; Critchfield et al., 2017b). My own commitment with the *Verbal Behavior Matters* blog is to highlight the work of behavior analysts studying a wide array of related content and to sprinkle each entry with hyperlinks to relevant research published in TAVB in an effort increase the visibility of the journal.

The Applied Research-To-Practice Gap

It is likely that the applied research-to-practice gap will persist despite continued efforts to narrow this gap. However, some recent advances in manualizing assessments focused on verbal behavior for learners with autism and related disorders (Dixon, 2014a; Sundberg, 2008) and derived stimulus relations (Dixon, 2014b, 2015, 2016), as well as treatment programming (Rehfeldt & Barnes-Holmes, 2009), may help to bridge this gap. In addition, the updated Fifth Edition Task List of the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB, 2017) includes specific items related to both verbal behavior (i.e., B-14: “Define and provide examples of the verbal operants,” p. 2; G-11: “Use Skinner’s analysis to teach verbal behavior,” p. 4) and derived stimulus relations (B-15: “Define and provide examples of derived stimulus relations,” p. 2; G-12: “Use equivalence-based instruction,” p. 4).

Despite the availability of the aforementioned resources, as well as the requirements imposed by the BACB, we are not able to evaluate how often practitioners are incorporating advanced verbal behavior and derived relational responding programming into their practice. To better evaluate the use of these resources, a survey focused on the frequency of use, potential barriers, and perceived or actual challenges to incorporating this technology could be developed and distributed to Board Certified

Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) at all levels (i.e., BCBAs, Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts, BCBA-Doctoral). A similar approach was used to evaluate clinical practices in early and intensive behavioral intervention for autism (Love, Carr, Almason, & Petursdottir, 2009), clinical practice for assessing preferences of individuals with developmental disabilities (Graff & Karsten, 2012), and most recently functional assessment methods used in practice (Oliver, Pratt, & Normand, 2015). The information gathered from this survey research helps to document current practice and identifies where action is needed.

On the education front, we should strive to incorporate the aforementioned information into all verified course sequences and emphasize how critical it is to all applied behavior analysts. A recent survey of a select group of graduate training programs revealed that the most frequently assigned readings on verbal behavior were focused on topics related to Skinner's elementary verbal operants (Pastrana et al., 2018). This is a good starting point; however, graduate training programs should consider incorporating portions of seminal readings (Skinner, 1957), as well as readings on more advanced topics in verbal behavior (Hayes et al., 2001; Sidman, 1994), even if no one course is solely dedicated to this topic. In addition, if it is not already part of the curriculum, graduate programs and clinical supervisors may consider incorporating a requirement for students/supervisees to gain firsthand experience in the implementation of a variety of behavioral language assessments (i.e., Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills–Revised [ABLLS-R], Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program [VB-MAPP], and Promoting the Emergence of Advanced Knowledge [PEAK]) as part of the supervisees' clinical experience.

As for the role this journal will play in bridging the applied research-to-practice gap, we will promote special initiatives, such as the revamping of the Brief Report, in an attempt to actively encourage practitioners to submit their empirical work for consideration of publication in TAVB. One avenue to increase the number of submissions by scientist-practitioners is to adopt a practice whereby manuscripts that do not demonstrate experimental control may be submitted and considered for publication. To be clear, this is *not* a call for poorly designed studies. Rather, applied researchers and practitioners may find that their well-designed studies do not demonstrate experimental control due to “intervention boundaries” (Tincani & Travers, 2018). Intervention boundaries are described as variables that impact whether a specified intervention demonstrates experimental control. These include inconsistent levels of intervention intensity across studies and idiosyncrasies in participant characteristics. If this information is clearly outlined in manuscripts, dissemination of studies that do not demonstrate experimental control may help us to better understand these intervention boundaries and also help us to better address the limitations practitioners face in the field.

The Future of TAVB

One way to evaluate the visibility and influence of a journal is to examine the number of times it is cited in other journals. Petursdottir, Peterson, and Peters (2009) conducted an analysis for TAVB citations in what are considered to be the premier behavior-analytic journals, the *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* and the *Journal*

of *Applied Behavior Analysis*. This analysis revealed that interest in verbal behavior research showed healthy, albeit slow, growth during the period from 1983 to 2007. The assessment also revealed 35 other journals that had cited work that was originally published in TAVB. However, as noted by the authors,

. . . more than half of the citations that were recorded from *The Behavior Analyst* and *The Psychological Record*, and almost all of the citations from [the] *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy* were from articles that commemorated the 50th anniversary of Skinner's (1957) *Verbal Behavior*. . . or evaluated the contributions of this work to the psychological literature. (p. 141)

This means that the number of citations of TAVB in other journals for this time period may not be an illustration of their typical level. Moreover, the journals that did tend to cite TAVB most often were also journals that published behavior-analytic research. It is readily apparent that there is much work to be done in sharing our body of work with researchers outside of our field.

Besides publishing content on blogs as stated previously, the visibility of the journal and our account of human language could be elevated by inviting prominent verbal behavior researchers to submit their work to TAVB. In keeping with our revised mission, the invited submissions would necessarily be focused on the overlap among the varied conceptual analyses of verbal behavior within the field. In addition, behavior analysts who are conducting research on topics that have not been well represented in the journal are especially encouraged to submit their work to TAVB. Examples of areas that are still in sore need of attention from the behavior-analytic community include narrative (Hineline, 2018), problem solving (Miguel, 2018), complex verbal behavior and its role in organizational behavior management (Maraccini, Houtmanfar, & Szarko, 2016), second-language acquisition (Houtmanfar, Hayes, & Herbst, 2005), audience control (Dixon, Blevins, Belisle, & Bethel, 2018), rule following (Wilson & Dixon, 2015), and overlap in areas such as music (Reynolds & Hayes, 2017), to name a few.

In order to effectively address some of the topics outlined here, behavior analysts may need to embrace nontraditional methodologies (Palmer, 1999). For example, observational data collection recently helped to demonstrate child-caregiver contingencies that contributed to a toddler's vocalizations and acquisition of verbal operants (Cruvinel & Costa Hübner, 2013). Perhaps advanced technology (i.e., The Language Environment Analysis (LENA®)) can help to facilitate this type of data collection for behavior analysts (Wang et al., 2017). In another recent demonstration of alternative methodologies, Critchfield et al. (2017a) described five studies of publicly available word-emotion ratings that can be applied to evaluate the general public's response to behavior-analytic terminology. The authors provide suggestions for additional research in this area that can elucidate the challenges we face within our own communication efforts.

The next decade of verbal behavior research holds much promise, but we must work together to attain the promise of this bright future. Of critical importance to the development of our field is disseminating a unified message. This can only be done if we can disagree without being disagreeable. This journal can serve to not only explore new and exciting research but also be a means for researchers from various perspectives to identify and address theoretical differences that interfere with this goal.

We must strive to overcome the challenges that interfere with our ability to functionally communicate with those outside of the field by first bridging the gap of communication *within* the field. We have so much to offer, but we have been unable to make our field known to those who would benefit from our science and thus have been largely ignored and passed up for theoretical orientations with more reinforcing marketing strategies. Skinner once said that “linguists have this peculiar capacity to make whatever they do seem terribly important” (Raphaeli, 2012). Isn’t it time for behavior analysis to follow suit?

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Rocío Rosales declares she has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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