

There is no such thing as a bad boy: The Circumstances View of problem behavior

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From the beginning of recorded time human beings have assigned blame to persons who misbehave. The first prominent person to make an alternative case was Father Edward J. Flanagan, the founder of Boys Town, who proclaimed there was “no such thing as a bad boy, only bad environment, bad modeling, and bad teaching” (Oursler & Oursler, 1949, p. 7) in other words, bad circumstances. This paper will refer to this perspective as the Circumstances View of problem behavior and anchor it as the foundational idea for the field of behavior analysis. This paper will discuss the origins of the Circumstances View, the benefits that result from its adoption, reasons why its adoption is not more widespread, and suggestions for disseminating it more widely.

Key words: blaming, Boys Town, circumstances view, compassion, social validity

Packs of orphaned boys roamed Omaha, Nebraska in the early 20th century. A young priest named Father Edward J. Flanagan bought a home in downtown Omaha and invited five of them to live with him. This was risky because the boys lived on the streets, doing whatever was necessary for survival and their efforts were often unsafe, uncivilized, and illegal. The citizens of Omaha thought of them as filthy, dangerous, bad boys. The situation with the boys was not confined to Omaha, it was happening across the country and, thus, Father Flanagan’s “experiment” drew substantial attention.

Father Flanagan was a brilliant public spokesperson and the Hall of History in the now incorporated city of Boys Town, Nebraska has numerous mockups of front-page articles in newspapers from around the country

broadcasting his unique view of the orphaned boys. His proclamation about the boys that drew the most attention is: “There is no such thing as a bad boy, only bad environment, bad modeling and bad teaching” (Oursler & Oursler, 1949). His position was that the boys were not bad. Instead, these were boys to whom many bad things had happened and that those bad things taught the boys to misbehave. Flanagan arranged for many good things to happen to these boys with the intent of teaching them to behave appropriately. He began his program in 1917 and it is now one of the best-known programs for troubled out of home children and adolescents in the world. Although it used a variety of programmatic approaches to behavior management in the first decades of its existence, since the early 1970s it has used a signature application from behavior analysis, the Teaching Family Model (Phillips et al., 1974). Results from a vast number of investigations evaluating aspects of the TFM at Boys Town reflect abiding success across multiple dimensions of behavior (e.g., Friman, 2000; Ringle et al., 2012).

Father Flanagan’s position on the boys reflects a view that will be referred to in this paper as the Circumstances View of behavior, meaning that behavior is a function of its circumstances. Coincidentally, this is the

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foundational idea for the science and practice of behavior analysis and its philosophy, radical behaviorism. At the level of theory, a major difference between behavior analysis and mainstream psychology is the relative emphasis on circumstances, rather than organismic variables, as a determinant of behavior. Behavior analysts favor circumstances and mainstream psychologists favor the person (Hineline, 1992).

Focusing on the person as the source of problem behavior tacitly endorses blame of the person for their own actions. A relevant perspective on circumstances and blaming involves a social psychology concept called the fundamental attribution error (see Hineline, 1992 for a behavior analytic perspective). The error involves attributing one's own problem behavior to circumstances and the problem behavior of others to the persons themselves. A ubiquitous assumption is that the problem behavior of others is the result of defects in organismic constructs such as morality (e.g., they are evil), character or personality (e.g., they are lazy), or psyche (e.g., they are crazy). Attributing problem behavior to such defects is the principal way people blame those misbehaving for their actions and justify how they then treat those individuals.

The blame perspective underlies most punitive actions of humans against other humans (e.g., war, pogroms, genocides, martyrdoms, crucifixions, assassinations, the holocaust, divorces, child abuse). Blame not only allows or justifies aversive treatment of misbehaving persons, it also often compels aversive treatment (e.g., to teach them the error of their ways, give them their comeuppance, vindicate victims, establish justice). Views such as these, and the blame framework that spawns them, permeate the collective stance towards problem behavior so completely that they have a veritable metaphysical certitude. They suffuse the approach to misbehavior in diverse contexts ranging from legal proceedings and law enforcement to home, school, and occupational discipline programs.

They imbue beliefs about problem behavior and when the problems are particularly egregious, the concept of evil is often recruited as a description (e.g., he is evil) or an explanation (e.g., he did it because he is evil). The belief that evil exists not in the behavior nor its circumstances, but in some essential aspect of the person is ubiquitous (e.g., Bennet et al., 2008).

Although not nearly as widespread, the Circumstances View offers a humane and compassionate alternative to the blame-oriented view of problem behavior. The core feature of behavior analytic concepts and research is the search for functional circumstances and the sources of those influential circumstances. Circumstances are also central to Darwin's account of ontogeny and phylogeny. Skinner theorized about a parallel between Darwin's account, at the level of species, and his own account, at the level of behavior (Baum, 2017; Catania, 2013; Skinner, 1981). Despite the elevated position Darwin's and Skinner's Circumstances perspective reached atop the intellectual hierarchy in the modern world, neither man's work appears to have diminished the ubiquity of the view that the source of problematic human behavior is the misbehaving person him or herself.

Skinner made bold attempts to push the Circumstances View further into the world with popular books such as *Walden II* (Skinner, 1948) and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (Skinner, 1971) and provocative papers such as "*A lecture on having a poem*" (Skinner, 1972). Unfortunately, these efforts may well have contracted rather than expanded the influence of the Circumstances View. Skinner (1948) raised the specter of totalitarianism, both inside and outside of behavior analysis (e.g., Ardila, 1990). Skinner (1971; 1972) targeted cherished human qualities and credited circumstances rather than persons exhibiting the qualities. This reflected a laudatory theoretical perspective, but it was lamentable from a political perspective. Disconcerting though it may be, the politics associated with ideas are significantly

related to the extent of their acceptance (e.g., Kuhn, 1970). Responses from influential scholars and scientists were abundant and highly critical of the Circumstances View as the source of our better qualities (e.g., Rubenstein, 1971). Skinner may have been more successful in disseminating the view had his analysis targeted problematic behavior rather than virtuous qualities with corresponding changes in title (e.g., “beyond blaming and punishing”). The purposes of this paper are to 1) demonstrate the benefits attained by adopting the Circumstances View of problematic behavior, 2) explore the circumstantial explanations for the failure of society and even behavior analysts to fully embrace the Circumstances View, and 3) provide recommendations for furthering the dissemination and impact of the Circumstances View.

The Circumstances View of Problem Behavior

The Circumstances View of problem behavior attributes the source of the problem not to the person him or herself but to what has happened to the person over the course of their life up to the occurrence of the behavior(s) of concern. Therefore, the Circumstances View guides its adherents not to fix the blame upon a person but to fix the problem(s) (i.e., the behavior) by altering the circumstances. Thus, the Circumstances View is relatively easy on the person (i.e., a compassionate perspective) and relatively hard on the problem (i.e., problematic behavior must still change). Furthermore, virtually everything to which the Circumstances View is applied improves. For example, the application of this view has resulted in significant benefits for persons with developmental disabilities. In combination with the Normalization and Deinstitutionalization movements of the 1970s, it virtually emptied the “human warehouses” in this country (Wolfensberger, 1972; also see Burtner, 2020).

As a representative example, Boulder River School and Hospital (BRSH) in Boulder,

Montana housed as many as 1200 residents in the early 1970s (Asylum Projects, 2020; Montana Government Operations Unit, 2015). In 1974, the deinstitutionalization movement began at BRSH. The program had 11 “cottages” and it hired persons with advanced degrees (M.A. or Ph.D.) with emphasis on behavior analysis and placed one in each cottage with instructions to create and implement behavior-training programs to prepare residents for community placement. Little formal behavioral treatment for residents had occurred during the preceding 85 years of the institution’s existence, which had been rife with reports of abuse, destruction, and death.

Prior to the behavior analytic treatment movement, staff and persons in surrounding communities believed the residents were incapable of learning to adapt to less restrictive settings. That the institution itself might compose a set of conditions that inaugurated and maintained the behaviors of concern did not receive serious consideration until the behavior analysis treatment staff revealed the benefits of the Circumstances View through the success of their programming. Those programs altered aspects of the environment (i.e., the circumstances) and reduced or eliminated a broad range of problem behaviors such as violent aggression, coprophagia and other forms of extreme pica, self-injury, and chronic incontinence as well as the symptoms from a wide variety of developmental disabilities ranging from the Pierre Robin sequence to Prader-Willi syndrome (e.g., Friman, 1977; 1978; Montana Government Operations Unit, 2015; Moore, 1976; Plaska & Friman, 1979). These behavior improvements led to mass community placements, and by 1980 the census had fallen by 50%. At its closure in 2016, BRSH had only 51 residents. This is but one of many examples of the extraordinary benefit the Circumstances View has bestowed upon persons once housed in unhealthy and unforgiving institutional environments.

Another example of the benefits of the View is that behavior analytic concepts (and thus the

Circumstances View) have contributed to effective treatments for a wide variety of clinical conditions described in major diagnostic manuals (e.g., version V of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association; APA, 2015). Three of the most significant of these conditions include Autism Spectrum Disorder, Tourette's syndrome (discussed at greater length in the section on expanding research methods), and Depression. Regarding Depression, simply increasing value-oriented activity, a treatment known as behavioral activation, has produced better results than all the treatments derived from cognitive constructs and equal to those obtained from antidepressant medication (e.g., Jacobson et al., 2000). With behavioral activities, individuals make more and better contact with reinforcing circumstances when they are active than when they are isolated and inert. This underscores the value of the Circumstances View for this condition as individuals can alter their own circumstances and directly experience mood-based benefits.

A final example of the benefits of the Circumstances View is illustrated by a simple thought experiment. Imagine that you are late for work and you drive up to a busy intersection where the traffic light is red. Luckily there is only one car ahead of you at the light. The light turns green, but the car ahead does not move. You can see that there is a woman in the driver's seat who is looking into the back seat. She apparently does not know that the light has turned green. The light turns yellow and then red, and you wait through another cycle. The light ultimately turns green, but the situation repeats itself (i.e., the car remains stationary, the woman is still looking into the back seat) and the light progresses to red. This is infuriating and you get out of your car and approach hers to investigate and make her move. You tap upon her window, and she looks up. She has tears in her eyes and looks desperate and helpless. In the back seat her

baby is turning blue. In an instant, your anger and frustration dissipate while compassion and a desire to help take their place. The situation is transformed via your understanding of the relevant circumstances. That is the power of the Circumstances View, whose fundamental metaphorical axiom is that there is always a baby in the back seat. That is, there are always circumstances functionally associated with the behavior of concern. Viewing the behavior in that context can transform the quality of the responses to the behavior.

But Why So Few

The section above posits that the Circumstances View is powerful and beneficial across a broad set of problem behaviors. Unfortunately, this powerful, humane, and beneficial view has relatively few adherents in comparison with its alternatives (i.e., blame-oriented perspectives) and it is reasonable to ask why. The thousands of adherents are primarily behavior analysts. But billions of people adhere to the blame perspective as evidenced by our legal and justice systems, the extraordinary prevalence of incarceration, capital punishment at the state and federal levels of government, the extent to which politicians use blame to acquire and maintain power, and the editorial pages and programs of most major news outlets. One may reasonably ask why the Circumstances View is not more popular or widespread in application. There are numerous obstacles to dissemination of the Circumstances View, including some aspects of the Circumstances View itself and the alternative view, as well as some behavior exhibited by behavior analysts.

Features of the Circumstances View and Alternative View

The most obvious reason the Circumstances View is not more widely disseminated is that it is relatively new in the history of ideas. Although it may have been available in some form earlier, its first influential public advocate

was Father Flanagan. His early 20th century assertion that there was “no such thing as a bad boy” represents the essence of the Circumstances View (Oursler & Oursler, 1949), which cohered well with the writings of Skinner. Both men are rightly seen as advocates for the Circumstances View. However, this relatively new Circumstances View competes with the long-established, ubiquitous blame perspective on problem behavior. Thus, while there are thousands of advocates for the Circumstances View (e.g., behavior analysts), there are billions of persons who attribute the source of problem behavior to the misbehaving person him or herself.

In addition to being new, the Circumstances View is somewhat more difficult to use in comparison to the ease of blaming. It is virtually impossible to know all the circumstances that are functionally related to a problem behavior. Even knowing some of them is a challenge. The behavior analytic method for their identification is functional analysis, which requires experimental control over targeted environmental conditions. The relevant research usually focuses on simple behaviors exhibited by persons with a limited range of responding (Beavers et al., 2013). Far less evidence exists for a reliable method for determining compound functions of complex behaviors exhibited in uncontrolled conditions by high functioning persons. For example, in the special issue of the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis (JABA)* commemorating 30 years of research on functional analysis (Beavers et al., 2013) only three of the 27 studies included typically developing persons and these were all young children. But identifying persons whose behavior is a problem is a simple matter, and with limited knowledge of functional circumstances, blaming them requires little to no effort and easily satisfies the search for cause. In this respect, the alternative view focused on blame is not only much older, but also is seemingly easier and may inherently be more appealing.

The sheer ubiquity of blaming suggests that blaming others for their behavior is either

inherently reinforcing or very frequently reinforced. Blaming begins as early as three years of age and by age six it begins to be accompanied by the desire to punish, tendencies which last a lifetime (Mendes et al., 2017; Riedl et al., 2015; Yudkin et al., 2020). One might speculate that fixing the blame on a person satisfies the search for causal explanations of problem behavior and thus, is usually reinforcing. Blaming others may also allow blamers to avoid being blamed themselves and even produce the reinforcing effects associated with a sense of moral superiority. Abundant rewards accrue to authorities who have caught persons accused of egregious crime and to those who successfully assign blame to them. News accounts of the capture and conviction of such persons also seems to appease community desire for justice and add to its sense of safety. Blame-oriented crime stories are usually near the front of the newspaper, whereas exoneration stories are near the back. Most of the great religions formally and sometimes quite publicly assign blame for moral infractions. Once the act of blaming achieves the cachet of a religious practice, it could motivate congregants to emulate the practice outside the church. Publicly blaming others is also a well-established and widely practiced tactic used by politicians seeking to increase their political power.

There also may be an evolutionary component that plays a role in the commonality of blaming others (Buss, 2019; Haidt, 2012; Hoffman, 2014; Plomin, 2018). The human brain evolved during a period of extraordinary peril (e.g., predatory animals, marauding tribes, starvation) and life expectancy was in the thirty-year range. In order to survive, humans had to detect threats early and avoid or ward them off. Those best at doing so survived and passed on their survival-oriented genetic predispositions. But safety and plentitude emerged so fast that the evolution of the brain did not keep pace. In short, humans have brains that significantly amplify the reinforcing properties of

identifying threats and dealing with them effectively. Although the threats that were present at the onset of brain-based evolution are absent in the industrialized western hemisphere, the predispositions remain. Thus, the type of threats that activate survival-oriented responses are not typically threats to health and wellbeing. Instead, they are more often threats to a way of thinking about what is or should be.

The Behavior of the View's Advocates

In addition to the features of the Circumstances View and the blame-oriented view, some of the behavior of the view's advocates may also limit its dissemination. Although the Circumstances View is foundational to behavior analysis, behavior analysts are among the obstacles to its dissemination when they behave in a manner that is inconsistent with it. Behavior analysts can be just as prone as non-behavior analysts to adopt a blame-laden explanation for problem behavior that occurs outside the specific stimulus control of their training (e.g., severe problem behavior of clients). For example, behavior analytic providers, similar to providers across the service delivery spectrum, might blame clients or their caregivers for noncompliance with treatment rather than examining the circumstances affecting compliance (e.g., Patterson & Forgatch, 1985). Disparaging characterizations of nonadherent clients are all too common in healthcare settings (e.g., resistant, stubborn, irresponsible). What is said or thought colloquially in private about nonadherent clients is impossible to document. Research focused on them, however, uses diagnostic classifications (e.g., depression) and psychological terms (e.g., stress) and the implication is that because of their personal limitations, they are responsible for the noncompliance (e.g., Rapoff, 2010). Yet the Circumstances View posits that circumstances are the ultimate cause for all problem behavior, including noncompliance with treatment, and

there is a large body of research documenting what many of those circumstances are (e.g., Allen & Warzak, 2000; Rapoff, 2010).

Behavior analysts may also adopt a disparaging and blame-oriented view of those in the field whose positions differ from their own. This tendency is universal and possibly stems from an evolutionary design that has humans often seeing difference as potentially threatening even when the difference is merely in intellectual positions and relatively small. Behavior analysts are not exempt. For example, Positive Behavior Support (PBS) is very similar to applied behavior analysis (Weiss et al., 2010) yet the modest difference between the two fields is sufficient to animate forceful criticism of PBS by conventional behavior analysts (Johnston et al., 2006). As another example, Skinner caricatured interbehaviorists as cuckoos, birds known to use the nests of other birds to lay their eggs (Skinner, 1988). Despite the ideological similarity between behavior analysis and interbehaviorism he wanted them out of behavior analysis. In other words, he was more concerned with ideological purity than with expanding the size and diversity of the field. There appears to be more survival-oriented reinforcement accruing from detecting difference (e.g., in ethnicity, religion, politics, intellectual points of view, beliefs, etc.) than there is for similarity.

This is not to say there is no reinforcing value in the detection of similarity; just that it appears significantly less than in the detection of difference because of its enhanced potential for threat. Furthermore, seeing similarity in the presence of formal difference does not appear to have as much survival value as seeing difference in the presence of formal similarity. The recently deceased antelope would still be alive if it were able to detect that the two apparent antelope nearby were huntsmen wearing antelope skins. Problematic political and economic dynamics of various countries and corporations could have been avoided if authoritative members were better at detecting spies within their

midst. The behavior analytic reactions to PBS and interbehaviorism are also cases in point.

Lastly, behavior analysts may also fail to embody the Circumstances View when professionals from other fields deride or dismiss behavior analytic research or applications despite their demonstrable success. The general sentiment seems to be that there is something wrong with their thinking (i.e., wrong with them) rather than curiosity about the circumstances that are functionally related to the dismissal. The dissemination of an idea is heavily dependent on the ease of its transmission (Critchfield & Reed, 2017; Friman, 2017), and unfortunately both the use of behavior analytic language and the specifics of its research may increase the difficulty of transmitting the Circumstances View. That is, the language and the research may well create circumstances that lead to dismissal of the view.

Behavior Analytic Language

All areas of scientific inquiry have an idiosyncratic set of terms the use of which is governed by precision, specificity, and parsimony. The use of these specific, common terms in any given science allows members of that scientific community to communicate with each other efficiently while minimizing misunderstanding (Chiesa, 1994; Hinline, 1980; Normand, 2019). The terms are useful in within-group communications such as peer-reviewed journal articles, technical books, scientific conference presentations and graduate and undergraduate classrooms. The audiences for these communications are either fluent in the technical language of their field or seek to be so.

As conversations migrate away from these locations and into environments populated by other scientific fields or even the general populace, the utility of the idiosyncratic terms drops off precipitously. For the sciences that investigate nonhuman phenomena (e.g., astrophysics) or human phenomena that are outside the knowledge base of most laypersons

(e.g., nephrology), the most danger is a failure to comprehend what is being communicated. For sciences that contend with human phenomena about which laypersons are well versed (e.g., psychology, behavior analysis), the problem is compounded because the danger of incomprehension is now coupled with a potential for rejection of technical language and a preference for colloquial expression, especially when the conversation is about one's own behavior or the behavior of loved ones (e.g., Chiesa, 1994; Friman, 2006a).

The lay community is unlikely to learn or adopt idiosyncratic technical terms to discuss phenomena for which it has suitable colloquial alternatives. For example, the general populace will not likely abandon 'label' or 'description' in favor of 'tact', or 'request' in favor of 'mand.' It is also hard to imagine persons outside behavior analysis ever using terms like 'autoclitic,' 'intraverbal,' or 'motivating operation.' An attempt to persuade any of them to do so in an ordinary conversational venue is likely to instigate dismissal and possibly worse. In addition to resistance to unfamiliar terms for ordinary experience, the lay community is likely to reject eccentric uses of colloquial terms. For example, correcting laypersons for using the colloquial version of 'punishment' or informing them that behaviors rather than persons are reinforced could harm dissemination efforts.

More bluntly, behavior analysis is not focused on never-seen phenomena located on the surface of a distant planet, 20,000 leagues beneath the sea, or under the lens of an electron microscope. If those were the focus of the field, behavior analysis would surely be granted naming rights and the privilege of discussing the phenomena with any terms of its choosing. However, the focus is on human behavior phenomena, which are readily seen and universally discussed with long established language that is easy to use. Interest in human behavior is high, but the desire to forsake well-established ways of discussing it in favor of an unusual, and

often counterintuitive language alternative is remarkably low outside of behavior analysis. Persistence in using the technical language of behavior analysis in communication with persons outside the field has long since been a significant obstacle to the dissemination of its foundational ideas and thus the Circumstances View (e.g., Bailey, 1991; Foxx, 1996; Friman, 2006a; Lindsley, 1991; Poling, 2010).

Behavior Analytic Research

The boutique nature of behavior analytic research also presents an obstacle to dissemination. The published literature is small in comparison to mainstream psychology research and it has a unique and highly rigorous methodology. These aspects of the research base present obstacles to the dissemination of findings and to the dissemination of the Circumstances View, for at least four reasons. First, much of the research is focused on the behavior of rats, pigeons, and persons with developmental disabilities which may not seem directly relevant to much of the general populace (Friman, 2006b; 2010a; 2010b; 2014; Poling, 2010). Second, behavior analytic researchers have a long-standing history of not engaging with mainstream psychology or incorporating mainstream findings into the conceptual foundation of their research. This dismissal of mainstream findings occurs despite arguments for more professional ecumenicalism from behavior analysts (e.g., Critchfield & Farmer-Dougan, 2015). Influential scholars saw folly in this parochialism (e.g., Harlow, 1969; Krantz, 1971) yet Skinner's response was to emphatically endorse it: "We have been accused of creating our own ghetto...Rather than break out of the ghetto I think we should strengthen its walls" (Skinner, 1993, p. 5).

As a third reason for limited impact and dissemination, behavior analysts generally eschew population-based research methodologies in favor of small N methodologies. It is difficult for persons outside behavior analysis to see how

research based on such a small number of subjects is relevant for the overall population. Although many applications of behavior analysis are effective for a variety of problems, the absence of methodologies valued by the general scientific community (i.e., randomized clinical trials) limits disseminations. Scientists from other fields usually do not fully subscribe to the Circumstances View and, thus, they insert their own conceptual perspectives when using behavior analytic applications or investigating them using traditional group design methodologies. For example, behavior analysts discovered escape extinction, but the research on this topic is small compared with the breadth and extent of related research in mainstream psychology. The mainstream repackaging of escape extinction (i.e., exposure and response prevention) has been the subject of countless clinical trials and is one of the most empirically supported of all psychological treatments (e.g., Abramowitz, 1996; Barlow, 2002), but these investigators characterize exposure and response prevention as cognitive behavior therapy rather than as an extinction-based strategy exemplifying the Circumstances View.

The fourth barrier to dissemination is behavior analysts' reluctance to speculate beyond their data and tendency to make speculations that are limited in scope. This reluctance is understandable as speculations by behavior analysts often result in aversive verbal responses and social and editorial extinction. The ethos of the behavior analytic scientific community favors temperance and does not often reward expansive interpretation of data sets. The meticulous, time consuming, inexorable progression from initial observations to the ultimate description of equivalence relations described by Sidman (1994) is a classic example of what the behavior analytic research community favors. Despite the paradigm-shifting discovery that behavior could occur as a function of direct *and* indirect contingencies, Sidman's theorizing extended only to symbolic referencing and an empirical case for

use of the word ‘meaning.’ But Sidman’s findings expanded the explanatory potency of behavior analysis significantly beyond his rather modest theoretical extensions. One of Chomsky’s most damaging criticisms of Skinner’s theory of verbal behavior was that direct contingencies could not explain the exponential growth in language development in early childhood (Chomsky, 1959). Piaget argued that direct contingencies could not adequately explain the qualitative changes in cognitive abilities that emerge at higher levels of cognitive development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Rachman argued that direct contingencies could not adequately explain the extraordinary impairments and pathological stimulus control in generalized anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorders (Rachman, 2009). By incorporating Sidman’s work on indirect contingencies into its theoretical accounts, however, behavior analysis can credibly and parsimoniously account for an extensive array of clinical and cognitive phenomena, including language, clinical symptoms such as anxiety and depression, and cognitive abilities such as perspective taking and imagining (e.g., Hayes et al., 2001).

Recommendations for Extending the Circumstances View

The preceding sections need not be viewed as blaming but rather as descriptions of circumstances and behavior that have limited the impact of the view. What follows are descriptions of alternate circumstances and behavior that could expand that impact.

Be Behavior Analytic

This initial recommendation may seem simple and straightforward but also may be the most difficult to undertake. It requires abandoning long-standing, well-established critical interpretations of problem behavior (e.g., flawed morality, character, personality, psyche) and adopting the Circumstances View instead.

Doing so represents the essence of being behavior analytic but it is often impeded by emotional reactions evoked by problematic behavior. These more readily devolve to blame than they evolve to an understanding based on circumstances. Another difficulty is that the circumstances linked to problem behavior are often difficult or even impossible to accurately identify. Being behavior analytic requires the conviction that the circumstances exist, nonetheless. For example, in the presence of problematic behavior one is likely to notice an almost automatic tendency to judge the misbehaving person critically. A subsequent behavior analytic response would be to seriously ask oneself questions such as “What else could this mean?” or “What has happened to cause this person to act that way?” and to formulate at least one plausible set of explanatory circumstances. As another example, when a person emphatically states a view with which one disagrees, a behavior analytic alternative to correcting or challenging it would be to do everything possible to learn of the circumstances that caused the person to hold the view. Doing so is consistent with the overarching theme of Skinner’s *Verbal Behavior* (1957). Specifically, the meaning of an utterance is found in the circumstances that are functionally linked to its emission. Furthermore, curiosity about the origins of an espoused problematic belief seems much less likely to instigate resistance than challenges directed to the belief itself. Finally, when struggling to adopt and maintain the Circumstances View of problem behavior it may be helpful to reflect on Skinner’s assertion that the organism is always right, that is, the organism’s response is always a function of the circumstances to which the organism has been exposed (Bijou, 1999, p. 183; Vargas, 2020, p. 160),

Members of the business community embrace a similar position when they proclaim that the customer is always right (e.g., Craven, 2002). Furthermore, the marketing dimension of that community operates in a way that is entirely consistent with being

behavior analytic. Specifically, its members arrange stimulus conditions intended to establish preferences and lead to purchases and their methods are routinely successful. For example, they arrange stimulus conditions that result in purchase of products (e.g., bottled water) that are otherwise available for free (e.g., tap water), higher payment for inferior products (e.g., ripped clothes) that are available for lower payment in a superior form (e.g., unripped clothes), or purchase and consumption of products that are notoriously unhealthy (e.g., tobacco, alcohol). If a stimulus arrangement does not produce preference and purchase, they do not assume there is something wrong with the potential customer, they assume there is something wrong with the stimulus arrangement and so they rearrange it and try again. This is an example of being behavior analytic; specifically, it is the ontological stance that the source of behavior is in circumstances, not the person.

Although it may seem unnecessary or even distasteful to some, behavior analysis would surely benefit from much more marketing than has been conducted historically. Despite its extraordinary discoveries, it has yet to achieve mainstream prominence. Given what good marketers can do with inferior or even harmful products, it seems safe to assume they could do substantially more with the superior and healthful products produced by behavior analysts. Going a step further, it seems safe to assume that effective marketing would expand the adoption of the Circumstances View itself.

Use Readily Understandable Language

When speaking to persons outside behavior analysis, use language that they are most likely to understand and adopt forms of communication most likely to generate interest and produce persuasion. A version of this advice has been followed by successful professionals across a broad spectrum of specialties ranging from politics to journalism. It was also a significant factor

contributing to the widespread interest in, and admiration for, legendary scientists such as Richard Feynman (e.g., Feynman & Leighton, 1985) and Albert Einstein (e.g., Einstein, 2014). It seems safe to say following it would also improve the disseminative efforts within behavior analysis. As a first step, behavior analysts could tell stories that reflect the Circumstantial View. The subject of narrative is just beginning to generate interest in the behavior analytic community with the apparent recognition that storytelling is one of the most time-honored and tested ways humans communicate (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2018; Hinline, 2018). Great storytellers use a variety of rhetorical strategies to recruit avid listening and guidelines for how to use them are abundant—just none written for or by behavior analysis (e.g., Biesenbach, 2018). One fundamental goal (perhaps the fundamental goal) of a good storyteller is have the listener “suspend his or her disbelief.” Said differently, it is to persuade the listener to believe what they are hearing. The goal of this paper (and presumably the field) is to persuade people outside the field to adopt (e.g., believe in) the Circumstances View of behavior. Telling captivating stories that make behavior analytic points would seem to be a more effective method for doing this than providing technical descriptions of behavior analytic concepts, attempting to modify the behavioral grammar of those outside the field, or critiquing mentalistic perspectives.

For example, the unprecedented dissemination of Early Intensive Behavioral Treatment (EIBI) for autism is almost certainly due at least as much to the influence of the very readable, emotionally evocative story told in the book *Let Me Hear Your Voice: A Family's Triumph over Autism* (Maurice, 1993) than to initial study of it by Lovaas (1987) or the subsequent technical lectures, papers, and courses devoted to it. As another example, hypnosis, despite its lurid reputation and sensationalized history, actually has a large body of empirical support (e.g., Terhune et al., 2017), especially for its use as

nonpharmacological anesthesia (e.g., Freericks, 2001). Hypnotists use easy to follow stories and plain language to persuade subjects to exhibit behavior consistent with any of a diverse array of hypnotic suggestions. For example, medical hypnotists can persuade surgical patients that operations on their bodies are not painful or at least not unbearably so, thus allowing the patients to forgo or at least limit pharmaceutical anesthesia. If readily understood stories and simple language can accomplish outcomes like those, it seems more than plausible that using similar methods could enhance efforts to persuade non-behavior analysts to look favorably upon the Circumstances View. A related exercise for students would require that they create at least one (more would be better) compelling, readily apprehensible story for each of the known behavioral processes.

Expand Behavior Analytic Research Methodology

Increasing the N in at least a segment of behavior analytic research will correspondingly increase the dissemination of the findings and the Circumstances View. Small N research methodology has served behavior analysis well. It has played an immeasurably important role in the discovery, application, and generalization of all the known behavior analytic concepts and applications. The emphasis on operational definitions, data collection, visual analysis, internal validity, avoidance of Type I errors, and probing research questions has led to extraordinary basic discoveries (e.g., *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*) which, in turn, led to significant applied discoveries (e.g., *JABA*). However, the research methods that yielded these discoveries are incapable of demonstrating their value for large populations. That goal requires a different research methodology, one that from a behavior analytic status quo perspective, is of questionable value. As discussed

previously, this parochial stance on methodology has resulted in researchers outside behavior analysis coopting its discoveries, examining their value for large groups, and routing the credit to non-behavior analytic perspectives (e.g., cognitive behavior therapy). Coopted credit is unfortunate for behavior analysis but there is a much greater downside. Specifically, as behavior analytic discoveries migrate to non-behavior analysis research teams, the Circumstances View does not migrate with them. For behavior analytic research to yield findings relevant for large populations, behavior analytic researchers and research outlets will simply have to embrace large N research methods as a means of demonstrating the external validity of their small N findings. A recent paper in *JABA* describes one method for accomplishing this (Hagopian, 2020). And below are two examples reflecting the value of doing so.

The first example involves the original study demonstrating the benefits of EIBI for young children on the autism spectrum (Lovaas, 1987). It was a large N group design study using inferential statistics and it was published in a mainstream psychology journal (i.e., *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*). This single study, despite using methods wholly inconsistent with behavior analytic research conventions, led to one of the largest expansions of research and application in the history of behavior analysis. Furthermore, knowledge of the benefits of EIBI breached the boundaries of behavior analysis and expanded into the lay community, as reflected by best-selling books (e.g., Maurice, 1993) and abundant media coverage.

The second example involves Nate Azrin's research on habit reversal, a multicomponent application for habitual behaviors. Habit reversal successfully reduces the tics resulting from Tourette's syndrome, an incurable neurological disease typified by vocal and motor tics that worsen over time. Prior to Azrin's research, the only treatment that had produced a reliable reduction in the tics associated with Tourette's

was antipsychotic medication. Perhaps recognizing the limitations posed to dissemination by confining his research to small N designs and findings to behavior analysis journals, Azrin used modified group designs for his work on Tourette's and published findings in behavior therapy journals (e.g., Azrin & Peterson, 1990). His work has led to one of the most extraordinary contributions behavior analysis has made to the medical and psychological treatment literatures in its history. Habit reversal is now a centerpiece of the treatment armamentarium used by psychologists, neurologists, and psychiatrists for treatment of tics and Tourette's around the world. This migration from behavior analysis labs to the world at large was due to the positive results of a variety of large N studies published in some of the most influential journals in the social and medical sciences (e.g., Deckersbach et al., 2003; Piacentini et al., 2010).

The epitome of this progression was an article in *Newsweek* declaring the arrival of a new approach to stopping tics: habit reversal (Skipp & Campo-Flores, 2007). The importance of the progression insofar as the Circumstances View is concerned is hard to overestimate. Although circumstances have not been identified as causal for Autism Spectrum Disorders or Tourette's, the arrangement of them in the name of treatment is increasingly seen as critical. That the strategic arrangement of circumstances can remediate the symptoms of genetically inherited syndromes long thought to be completely resistant to any type of non-medical intervention is a powerful advertisement for the Circumstances View.

Do More Research on Mainstream Topics

Although the studies mentioned above may seem as if they fit this suggestion because they attracted mainstream attention (e.g., Maurice, 1993; Skipp & Campo-Flores, 2007) the conditions targeted in them reside in one tail of the

normal distribution. Mainstream conditions are under the dome of that distribution (Friman, 2006b; Poling, 2010). As stated above, behavior analysis research focuses mostly on subjects and conditions that occupy one tail end (Friman, 2010b; Poling, 2010). There are, however, some examples to the contrary, and they reflect the disseminative power of mainstream subject matter. I will draw upon two samples of my own research to buttress this claim.

The first example involves a small study on treatment for chronic thumb sucking in seven typically developing children. In the industrialized western hemisphere, thumb sucking in typically developing children is all but universal in infancy and still highly prevalent at age five (Friman et al., 2001). In other words, it is a mainstream concern that is seen most frequently by pediatric medical providers and dentists. The intervention was successful for all subjects and the multiple baseline revealed good experimental control. The natural inclination was to attempt publication in *JABA*. However, because pediatricians are much more likely than behavior analysts to see cases of thumb sucking, we submitted the paper to *Pediatrics*, the core journal for the American Academy of Pediatrics, which has 67,000 members (Friman et al., 1987). Immediately following publication, local TV and radio stations, newspapers from around the world, and most of the mainstream periodicals devoted to children in the United States inundated us with requests for interviews. The mainstream focus and outlet produced these extraordinary results.

The second example involved bedtime resistance in typically developing children, at least 30% of whom will require professional assistance (e.g., pediatricians) for the problem (Ferber, 1995; Friman & Schnoes, 2020). Our intervention involved a modified extinction procedure called the 'bedtime pass' and the initial study included two subjects. Both responded well to the treatment, as revealed by an ABAB withdrawal experimental design. Although the study

was designed for publication in *JABA*, bedtime resistance is first and often only seen by pediatricians, therefore we submitted the paper to the American Medical Association's (AMA) journal devoted to children instead (Friman et al., 1999). The editor of the journal attached the following note to the title page of the published paper:

You might wonder why we'd publish a study involving 2 patients, 6 authors, and the intervention of a 5 X 7 card. The idea is so novel and easy, I hope our readers will try it and let us know if it works for their patients.

By "readers," the editor meant the many thousands of pediatricians around the world that subscribe to the journal. The average general pediatrician follows more than 1500 patients actively (Bocian et al., 1999). In line with the assertion that dissemination is dependent on the ease of the means of transmission, here, ease was accomplished by delivering an easy-to-understand-and-use application for a very common problem to a very large number of consumers (Friman, 2010a). The impact of the study was large and swift. As lead author, I was invited to head a press conference sponsored by the AMA in New York City. The night before the conference I dined with the president of the AMA and the Surgeon General of the United States, Dr. David Satcher. The following day, I was introduced by Dr. Satcher, whereupon I presented the study to more than 150 members of the press and for an hour after I answered questions about it and other behavioral applications for children. For several hours after that I was interviewed by print, radio, and television representatives. That evening, the third author of the study, Dr. Connie Schoes, demonstrated the method on the CBS evening news. The amount and quality of attention brought to this study was extraordinary, but also reflective of the appetite the media has for solutions to problems that confront large portions of the population.

These two studies do not represent systematic investigations; they represent scientific

dabbling and nothing more. Both stemmed from clinical practices that were subjected to analysis by the practitioners who used them. In other words, we were clinicians, not scientists. Yet the findings attracted abundant attention from the media. In each media encounter, the Circumstances View was present, either in the foreground or background. However, much more disseminative impact could be obtained if bona fide behavior analytic scientists whose primary professional activity is the conduct of rigorous systematic inquiries were to focus on similarly mainstream subjects.

Adopt a Bolder more Comprehensive Approach to Social Validity

The proposal is to do everything possible to increase the social validity of the Circumstances View and the methods used to disseminate it. Behavior analysis has almost solely focused on producing good science and has given little attention to producing good public relations. Although it is true that behavior analytic methods routinely produce better outcomes than more conventional methods (e.g., EIBI versus Floor time; Direct Instruction versus Whole Language), these are necessary but not sufficient for dissemination. Wolf (1978) marked the official beginning of the behavior analytic field's consideration of the consumer as critical to the validity of its applications. The result was a laudable focus on the consumer's impression of treatment targets, methods, and outcomes. But the relevant research was narrow, confined mostly to studies whose authors hoped to have published in prominent behavior analytic journals. It seems to have done little to increase the reputation of the field, acceptance of its products, or dissemination of the Circumstances View.

One of the likely reasons PBS gained such large market share is because it very explicitly values social dimensions of its practices (e.g., stakeholder participation). This is not to

say behavior analysis does not also value these dimensions, it does, but the valuing is much more implicit than explicit. An emerging emphasis on compassion in behavior analysis in general (e.g., Killeen, 2020) and behavior analytic treatment in particular (e.g., Taylor et al., 2019) does indicate that the field may be starting to focus on variables (e.g., relationships) that are less operational than those typically studied in its research programs (e.g., rate) but that may be just as important. For example, a large literature shows that the relationship between provider and client is a significant determinant not only of whether a treatment will be adopted but also whether it will actually work (e.g., Allen & Warzak, 2000; Chadwell et al., 2018; Friman, 2015; Patterson & Forgatch, 1985). Actually Wolf (1978) and this literature on relationships mirrors similar messages that have been present in western culture from the beginning of the first millennia (Aurelius, 1862) through the 20th (e.g., Carnegie, 1981) and 21st centuries (e.g., Martin, 2005). The message is simple: Treating people in a way that has them feel valued (e.g., acknowledged, appreciated, accepted) increases the probability they will value the person by whom they are thus treated. As they do, they are also more likely to value, or at least accept as valid, the person's perspective. If that perspective includes the Circumstances View, the possibility of its transmission increases.

Expand Unity in Behavior Analysis

One way to increase unity is to focus more attention on unifying and less on dividing themes. Behavior analysis is a diverse field suffused with distinctions and tribes of adherents to the sides of each. But behavior analysts do have at least three things in common, regardless of where they stand on the myriad divisive issues, and these will be discussed in the conclusion that follows. Increased focus on these commonalities could leach some of the

contentiousness that often emerges when behavior analysts on both sides of a distinction square off for debate or, unfortunately all too often, argument.

Reversing or at least relaxing the predisposition to search for and focus on differences merely requires the intentional search for and focus on similarities. Simple but also challenging, given the survival value evolution has imparted to detecting differences. But the behavior analytic concept of rule-governed behavior could aid in meeting the challenge. The concept has evolved significantly since Skinner (1969) created the distinction. The most expansive change is the description of it as behavior under the influence of verbal stimuli (Hayes, 1989). The most important feature of rule-governed behavior is its apparent effect on contingency-shaped behavior. Early research suggested it produced an insensitivity to direct contingencies (Shimoff et al., 1981). More recent research suggests that it does not produce actual insensitivity but rather, as a function of derived stimulus relations, it can significantly heighten sensitivity to verbal stimuli at the expense of stimuli imbedded in direct contingencies (Harte et al., 2020). The upshot is that verbal stimuli exert extraordinary influence on human behavior.

The verbal stimuli (i.e., rules) proposed here are reflected in one of Ronald Reagan's more famous (or infamous, depending on your political orientation) rules. In his attempt to unify Republicans he said, "Thou shalt not speak ill of any Republican." Perhaps some similar rules could help unify behavior analysts. Here is example of such a rule: When interacting with each other behavior analysts should search for, focus on, and talk about similarities far more than they do differences. As a corollary, for every difference detected, they should find multiple similarities. Research on interactional ratios of this sort shows that increasing a socially favorable numerator (e.g., pleasant social responses) over a socially unfavorable denominator (e.g., unpleasant responses) can improve a diverse array of relationships ranging from those

in troubled marriages (Gottman, 1994) to those involving troubled youth in out-of-home placements (e.g., Friman et al., 1997). It does not seem much of a stretch to suggest it could also benefit relationships among behavior analysts and produce more unity as a dividend.

Conclusion

As a logical conclusion to the previous section and a suitable endpoint for this paper, what follows are things all behavior analysts have in common. First, although practitioners vastly outnumber scientists in behavior analysis, all members value the scientific method and data-based decision making, much more so than most people outside behavior analysis with whom they interact. Second, all behavior analysts are part of a field whose ultimate intention is to make the world a better place. This mission was sketched abundantly in Skinner's writings as he created and shaped the field; by joining it all members implicitly, and most explicitly, take on the assignment in whatever position they hold (e.g., scientist, practitioner, educator). Basic scientists studying the behavior of rats and pigeons do so in an effort to bring behavior under experimental control to enhance understanding of the influence of circumstances on behavior as a means to improve the world in some way. The concepts they establish provide the empirical platform and scientific cachet for behavior analysis applications. The contributions of applied scientists and practitioners are perhaps more easily recognized as critical to the mission of making the world a better place. They are, respectively, the hub of generative scientific activity and the ultimate delivery vehicle for the products produced by basic scientists. Those who own and run behavior analysis clinics and programs are also mission critical because of their ability to create circumstances that facilitate service delivery. The upshot of this is that behavior analysis is dedicated to making the world a better place and thus all members of the field share in that enterprise.

The final unifying attribute epitomizes the theme of this paper. All behavior analysts, regardless of their position, are a source of dissemination for the Circumstances View. This view is the most powerful perspective ever invented by mankind for understanding, knowing, and approaching human behavior when that behavior is a problem. The damage done to the species by the blame perspective is incalculable. It was invented before recorded history presumably to establish control over the problem behaviors that arose when humans first started gathering in groups. During the time between then and now, its only significant modifications have been to the forms of blame (e.g., sins, treasons, heresy, accusations, indictments, verdicts) and corresponding punishments (e.g., stoning, immolation, the rack, hanging, electrocution, war). Its foundational presupposition, that misbehaving persons are the source of their own misbehavior, has been passed on fully intact. Thus, it has had thousands of years to reveal its value and has failed to do so. The savagery, suffering, oppression, and death instigated by it down through the ages is impossible to quantify. The time seems more than right for an alternate point of view, one kinder to the species and more likely to solve problems. The number of persons that have taken on distribution of the new way of thinking is infinitesimally small compared with the massive number of persons who unreservedly adhere to the blame perspective. Behavior analysts comprise almost the entire former group. The appeal here is for all behavior analysts to recognize each other as delivery vehicles for a way of thinking that could transform the quality of life on planet Earth and improve human relationships around the globe.

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