EDITORIAL: CONSTRUCTING JUSTICE

“The principal modus operandi of [advocacy] organizations is to frighten people rather than offer them a world to which they will turn because of the reinforcing consequences of doing so.” (B. F. Skinner, “Why We Are Not Acting to Save the World,” 1982)

Behavior and Social Issues has no shortage of serious issues to explore, many of them interrelated in complex ways. Among these are:

- Poverty, and growing income and asset disparities;
- Consumer excesses and financial exploitation encouraged by unregulated corporate capitalism;
- Environmental degradation and climate change;
- The escalation of imprisonment, especially among young men of color in the US;
- The widespread failure of public education among disadvantaged populations, despite the availability of effective educational technologies; and
- Collective violence, including political repression, war, genocide, and violence associated with drug, human and weapons trafficking.

In an increasingly globalized world, the problems on Chicago streets, in the mountains of Haiti, or in the Central African Republic cannot be understood without attention to local histories of racism or colonialism certainly, but neither can they be understood without analysis of the dynamics of the continuing exploitation structured into the contemporary global economy. The most critical issues we face are simultaneously local and global, and are profoundly serious, over time producing injury and death for hundreds of millions of human beings, other life forms, and the earth. All of the issues noted are the product of established patterns of transactions among human behavioral systems, which are responsible for shaping the “villains” and marginalizing entire populations while privileging others. The results of these patterns are what physician and human rights advocate Paul Farmer terms “structural violence,” and liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, “structural sin” (Griffin & Weis Block, 2013). Frightening certainly, and deeply disturbing; yet the effort going into “saving the world,” or even “repairing the world” remains modest at best (Farmer, 2013). Once again, Skinner was right (and is worth a reread).

Rigorous behavior analytic and behavioral systems analytic strategies for addressing such issues are in their infancy, and the number of behavior analytic scientists committed to exploring such strategies as their central work is vanishing small. The personal costs of doing such work can be high, the accomplishments meager, and the support limited. Some in the behavior analytic community question the capacity for and even the applicability of our science to contributing to solutions to such overwhelming and inevitably politically charged questions. Only limited financial and intellectual support for work in these areas is currently available. For example, research into sustainability and climate change, which some in our community are pursuing, is
welcome so long as that work can fit comfortably within a resource-intensive growth economy; but work that focuses on the environmental costs, corporate externalities, and the structural violence integral to that economy, not so much (Farmer, 2003; Hedges & Sacco, 2012).

These are serious obstacles, without question, and strategies for challenging them are badly underdeveloped; I will say more about this shortly. One key obstacle, however, appears to be conceptual, lying in how the issues are framed. Behavior analytic clinicians long ago, and organizational behavior analysts more recently, recognized that focusing on the behavior to be eliminated is extremely limiting, encourages the use of aversive strategies, provides limited guidance to people or systems, and, using Skinner’s classical phrase, does not reduce the “inclination” to behave in ways that have produced desirable outcomes.

With the kind permission of the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies, in the second issue of Volume 11 of this journal (published in 2002), we reprinted Israel Goldiamond’s classic paper “Toward a Constructional Approach to Social Problems: Ethical and Constitutional Issues Raised by Applied Behavior Analysis,” originally published in 1974 in Behaviorism. Goldiamond’s monograph length work strongly and persuasively argued that behavior analysis shift its focus from eliminating problems to constructing desirable behavior, leveraging current relevant repertoires with primary attention to reinforcers available in the contextual field. It is a rich piece of work that focused primarily on more micro level “social problems” than we are concerned with here, but makes a persuasive case for analyzing the dynamics of current problems, and then applying what can be learned to constructing desired, reinforcing states.

This is a valuable first conceptual recommendation for addressing social issues, but again a difficult one, because it calls for an at least somewhat common vision of the goal state we should be working toward, and tremendous motivation. The marketing-driven, ever-expanding consumerist society required to sustain a resource-intensive growth economy supports the structural realities identified at the beginning of this piece, which create inevitable damage to life, sustain poverty, and prove fatal to so many (malnutrition alone accounts for over half of global mortality, violence narrowly defined another 10%). As Lyle Grant (2011), and many others have persuasively argued, we cannot consume our way out of climate change. Economic arrangements structured around winners and losers will always drive, be working toward, and prove fatal to so many (malnutrition alone accounts for over half of global mortality, violence narrowly defined another 10%). As Lyle Grant (2011), and many others have persuasively argued, we cannot consume our way out of climate change. Economic arrangements structured around winners and losers will always drive, be working toward, and prove fatal to so many (malnutrition alone accounts for over half of global mortality, violence narrowly defined another 10%)...
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all clear. Just explaining the problems and the solutions to those who might initiate such processes, and asking them to do so, has so far not proven to be a powerful intervention. The reasons are perfectly evident with just a cursory look at the cultural and institutional structures established by the transactions among current behavioral systems.

Many within and outside behavior analysis have struggled with this “wicked problem” for a long time, including Skinner himself over many years. Serious progressive action to construct a simultaneously more just and more reinforcing world will be both an enormous scientific and educational challenge—and frankly will require a form of political resistance that challenges current socio-cultural and economic structural arrangements. There is growing interest in my own (other) discipline in what is termed structural social work, which recognizes that all of our service and educational systems are braided tightly into larger political and economic structures, and therefore that work for justice will always involve an element of liminality and resistance, even within our home structures. This in turn has led our group to look at the history and literature of political and civil resistance and nonviolent social action, to try to understand how those processes succeed or fail in behavioral systems terms, and how behavioral systems science might contribute to strengthening those processes to address the problems identified at the beginning of this paper (Mattaini, 2013). We identified highly plausible behavioral and dynamic strategies that appear to underlie six potential strategic options: (1) persuasion (which relies heavily on shifts in relational responding and reinforcement), (2) protest (largely systemic analogues of negative reinforcement), (3) disruptive noncooperation (primarily analogues of extinction with with positive and negative reinforcement commonly integrated into campaigns), (4) disruption of resources and contextual conditions necessary to maintain current functioning, (5) retaliation (which operates in often ineffective ways much like other forms of punishment), and (6) constructive noncooperation. It is likely to be this last that offers the greatest opportunities for constructing alternative realities.

Constructive noncooperation appears to be largely responsibly for the success of the civil rights movement, the American revolution, the progress of the LGBTQ populations, the fall of the Soviet Union, and many other movements (typically in concert with others of the strategies listed, and in some cases with violence, although the latter historically proved very costly and usually counterproductive) (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Mattaini, 2013; Schell, 2003). There is space here only to highlight three dimensions that have proven important in the success of constructive noncooperation as a strategic choice. First, there have always been some activist/dissidents who are willing, in Václav Havel’s terms, to “live in truth”—to persistently speak the truth and live as they believe one should live even in the face of threat. (There is a good deal of acceptance and commitment related action observed in such activists’ lives.) Their actions then act as establishing operations for related or more cautious acts by others.

Second, most people will not participate in activism alone (and high levels of participation are required for success, Chenoweth & Stephan); the development of cultures of activism—cultures of resistance—has been a universal foundation for contested social change. The behavioral systems dynamics underlying the sustainment of such cultural entities are fascinating to explore, and we believe that analysis has something to give back to activist groups. Further, if behavioral systems analysts can experiment to clarify the kinds of more reinforcing, less resource-intensive, and more just alternatives that Lyle Grant, and Skinner in his essay, “Why We Are Not Acting to Save the World,” suggest, activist groups will be essential to constructing alternative actions to influence the larger population. (For any of this to be likely, an activist/dissident group within behavior analysis will almost certainly be essential ...)

3
Third, activist cultures have in many historical cases constructed parallel structures, parallel institutions, and new groups within civil society that can institutionalize education and activism supporting the creation and maintenance of new practices, new patterns of collective living that by their very existence simultaneously offer rich reinforcement while challenging current social arrangements that allow and in many cases structure injustice, within sustained campaigns of activism. (It is difficult not to think about Walden Two in this context, but the social arrangements and cultural practices that are needed now will require contemporary analyses consistent with Goldiamond’s model, clarifying the goal state, and exploring current available repertoires and contexts that can be leveraged to shape desired practices.)

All of this would seem very idealistic were it not for two things. First, the problems that need to be forcefully addressed are both too serious and too deeply braided into contemporary sociopolitical and economic realities to respond to small changes among weak variables. The interdependencies among contemporary behavioral systems are deep and resilient; meaningful change most in some way disrupt those patterns (Piven, XXXX). And second, there are literally hundreds of examples of effective campaigns for major social change that can be drawn of for their lessons. There is room in this critical and creative work for everyone.

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References


