



## An Editorial on Revitalizing Behavioral Community Psychology: Where Do We Go From Here?

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Published online: 30 November 2021

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For more than half a century, behaviorists have contended that they can help address a wide range of complex, perplexing, and persistent societal problems that have challenged society for decades, including violence, substance abuse, climate change, war, health, racism, and educational and economic inequities. Since the late 1960s, one way that behaviorists have addressed these systemic issues is through a behavioral community approach that has focused on community health and development issues, including those related to socioeconomic conditions (Watson-Thompson et al., 2020). Yet, uncertainty often remains regarding the contributions of scientists and practitioners in applied behavioral analysis who are indeed acting to save the world by advancing the science of behavior to address the social ills plaguing humanity (Skinner, 1987).

### Emergence of Behavioral Community Psychology

In the 1970s, the emergence of behavioral community psychology was an attempt to gather and convene those scholars, scientists, teachers, and disseminators of information who aimed to be uncommitted to disciplines and unseparated by organizational affiliations. A goal of behavioral community psychology as a subspecialty area was to unite scientists across disciplines through a common vision for advancing behavioral community research and action in addressing societal conditions. However, the evolutionary journey of behavioral community psychology, including its rise and resurgence, has been the result of selection by consequences.

In the 1960s, a confluence of factors resulted in the emergence of behavioral community psychology as a subspecialty that focused on the integration of applied

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behavior analysis and community psychology. During the 1960s, multiple sociopolitical events spurred both tension and action, including the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the passage of the Community Mental Health Centers Act of 1964 (Saafir, 1982). Across disciplines, there was a heightened recognition that new and integrated approaches were necessary for addressing complex and multiply determined issues during a tumultuous decade. Additionally, there was an acknowledgment that not any single discipline could do it all, but multiple disciplines had much to offer together in addressing the many and varied, multifaceted societal issues. Richard Rakos (1983) summarized in the *Behaviorists for Social Action Journal* the importance of multidisciplinary approaches for advancing social change during this early period:

Behavior analysis may tell us how things work and how to enact change; the other disciplines tell us what is, was, and may be. Effective social action is more likely to be forthcoming from individuals who have a large behavioral and verbal repertoire, can respond productively to many S<sup>D</sup>'s, and can understand the effect of diverse reinforcers. This person probably will have a solid understanding of behavior analysis *and* comprehensive familiarity with the other sources of knowledge. . . . I am suggesting that to be effective we need to match our enthusiasm for the behavior analytic approach with the sophistication and humility of multidisciplinary data sources. Behavior analysis is a powerful heuristic and methodology for analyzing, organizing, and using the data—what it fails to provide is the necessary data itself. . . . For the behavior analytic branch of science at least, I see these disciplines performing their tempering role by becoming an integral part of the internal database—and it is this more comprehensive database which will then influence the goals and targets, that is, the values, of behavioral social intervention. (pp. 15–16)

By the early 1970s, behavioral community psychology had formed as a subspecialty area across behavior analysis and community psychology during the formative years of both disciplines (e.g., Jason, 1977). As divisions of the American Psychological Association, Behavior Analysis (Division 25) was established in 1964, and Community Psychology (Division 27) in 1966 (Tebes, 2016). From the mid-1970s through the early 1990s, behavioral community psychology was a bastion for interdisciplinary and behavioral approaches for addressing social issues.

Bogat and Jason (2000) indicated that “the field of behavioral community psychology has emerged . . . as a subspecialty of community psychology and ABA [applied behavior analysis]. It attempts to understand and change community problems through the application of behavioral theory and technology” (p. 101). Fawcett (1980) further expounded,

Planned change in communities has been the subject of study and practice in a broad array of fields, including community development, social work, public administration, urban planning, and psychology. Applications of learning theory and behavior analysis to community problems are among the complementary efforts of psychologists working in community settings. In the sub-field of behavioral community psychology, the methods

of applied behavior analysis are used to analyze community problems and to develop and evaluate replicable methods for solving such problems and improving the capacities of communities to achieve their own goals. (p. 7)

Through behavioral community psychology, applied behavior analysts and scientists interested in addressing systemic social problems found an ally in community psychology. Both community psychology and behavior analysis were a contemporaneous disciplinary challenger to the dominant psychological focus of the time that explained people's behavior by invoking their supposed internal dynamics. Instead, both disciplines viewed the environment as the source of problem behaviors and rejected various forms of individual disorder models to explain problem behavior.

As a subfield, behavioral community psychology combines behavior analysis's experimental rigor and focus on behavior, environmental contingencies, and effective intervention with community psychology's collaborative research strategy, social justice values, and emphasis on systems analysis, significant societal-level change, and primary and secondary prevention (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2019; Watson-Thompson, Fawcett, et al., 2015b). Research in behavior community psychology is based on community-informed collaboration with changes evaluated quantitatively and disseminated widely. Its intervention tools include familiar behavior-analytic ones like the functional behavior assessment (Watson-Thompson et al., 2015a), behavioral-skills training, and contingency modification, but also systems analyses and advocacy for societal changes that are sustainable and maximize the benefits for the community.

## **Establishment of Behaviorists for Social Action/Social Responsibility**

Behavioral community research and applications were featured in the *Behaviorists for Social Action Journal* (later renamed *Behavior Analysis and Social Action* and then *Behavior and Social Issues*, BSI). BSI and its predecessor journals featured publications in the areas of human rights, sustainability, and social justice (Luke et al., 2017). The journal was supported by the special interest group Behaviorists for Social Action (BFSA, 1978; later renamed Behaviorists for Social Responsibility), which is the oldest special interest group in the Association for Behavior Analysis International. According to the BFSA (1978), “the main goal of the organization [BFSA]—to encourage theoretical behavior analysis and practical action related to solving pressing social problems” (p. 57).

In the first issue of the *Behaviorists for Social Action Journal*, editor Joseph Morrow (1978) presented the ethical concern and responsibility of behaviorists to contribute to addressing issues that are sociopolitical as an intentional actor rather than as a passive bystander. Specifically, the early publications of the BFSA (and later BSI) were intended to advance the science of behavior that could aid in improving social conditions as “active participants in the struggle against injustice”

(Morrow, 1978, p. i). In the inaugural editorial for the BFSA, Joseph Morrow identified two primary concerns and advancements:

First of these concerns has to do with an ethical examination of our field, behaviorism, and of ourselves and colleagues as behaviorists. In particular, behaviorism must look at itself and ask some questions pertaining to our role in the social-political process that exists in this country. . . . Thus, our first concern is to involve behaviorism—the science of behavior—in that struggle. . . . The second general concern of BFSA and this journal should be to ask other social change movements to consider adding behaviorism to their arsenal. . . . BFSA and this journal should address itself to those persons outside our field, committed to ending a world of oppression. They should be asked to take another look at our science and what it has to offer. (p. i)

### **Parallel Paths for Groups Focused on Societal Issues**

Some of the strategies that advance behavioral community psychology in both behavior analysis and community psychology included (a) special interest groups across multiple professional associations and (b) publications and special issues promoting the subspecialty area and work across disciplines. Thus, by 1980, the Association for Behavior Analysis (ABA) and the Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy (AABT) had developed interest groups in behavioral community psychology that were coordinated in their aims and endeavors across the respective organizations (Rapport et al., 1980). Between 1978 and 1993, there was an active group in the ABA promoting behavioral community psychology (Watson-Thompson et al., 2020). For instance, in 1979, Stephen Fawcett coordinated a behavioral community psychology track at the ABA Annual Meeting. Between 1980 and 1991, there were 284 presentations at the ABA Annual Meeting that had specific designator codes for behavioral community psychology (Kangas & Vaidya, 2007). After 1991, the code for behavioral community psychology was neither used as a distinct code nor selected as a categorization for presentations at the ABA convention.

In AABT, Dick Winett, Mark Mathews, and Lenny Jason served as coordinators of the behavioral community interest group and organized a poster session at the 1980 AABT Annual Convention. By 1980, AABT had compiled a directory including more than 130 individuals who supported behavioral research in community settings (Rapport et al., 1980). A cadre of behavioral community scientists developed, several of who are contributors to this special issue, including Lenny Jason, David Glenwick, Scott Geller, and Stephen Fawcett, each of whom served as bridges between the behavioral and community spheres of engagement (S. Fawcett, personal communication, July 24, 2019). During the early stages of the subspecialty area, there were intentional efforts to promote the integration of behavioral community psychology across both disciplines. Community psychologists attended behavioral conferences including the AABT and ABA and published in behavioral journals during this time. Likewise, there was a small group of behaviorists who became and

remain active members of the Society for Community Research and Action, which is the professional association for community psychology.

Although there were some early champions of collaboration across both community psychology and behavior analysis, it was not without friction, as tensions emerged regarding the direction of community and societal applications within behavior analysis. As with any new area of study and practice, there were varying perspectives regarding the direction of the behavioral community psychology subspecialty area. Additionally, during this time, there may have been more modest support to promote sociopolitical action in what was still a relatively new discipline.

The mounting concerns related to behaviorists addressing societal issues resulted in some fractions within the ABA. Although the BFSA and Behavioral Community Psychology groups had similar goals, they were developing on parallel rather than intersecting paths. Although some of the aims of the two groups were similar and aligned with behavioral community values and perspectives, the strategies differed somewhat, and the two groups remained relatively distinct within the ABA. For some, the BFSA was viewed as too political and radical by those who supported a more conservative approach for such a young field (Rakos, 2019; Watson-Thompson et al., 2020). In addition, there was not sufficient interest to support the two groups with largely overlapping interests. Eventually, the Behavioral Community Psychology group dissolved, and some who remained affiliated with the ABA participated in the BFSA, whereas others continued to support behavioral community approaches through other disciplinary affiliations, such as the Society for Community Research and Action, the Society for Prevention Research, or the American Public Health Association.

## Advancing Behavioral Community Psychology During the 1980s to the Present

A series of publications intentionally tried to forge the way ahead for this new subspecialty area, including books and book series (e.g., Glenwick & Jason, 1980; Jason & Glenwick, 1984; Nietzel et al., 1977). The *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* (JABA) offered a compendium of articles in an issue focused on behavior analysis in the community from 1968 to 1986 (Greene et al., 1987). In the 1980s and 1990s, there were multiple special issues across several journals promoting behavioral community psychology (Bogat & Jason, 2000). There was a special issue on the application and advancement of behavioral community psychology in the *Journal of Community Psychology* (Glenwick & Jason, 1984), and JABA had a special issue on behavioral community intervention in 1991 and on current societal concerns in 1995.

Unfortunately, although behavioral community psychology experienced a period of steady growth throughout the 1980s and early 1990s that included high visibility in behavior-analytic journals and conferences, it became less prominent as a disciplinary subfield by the late 1990s. Over time, the focus of behavior analysis research and interventions became more restricted with “limited methodologies, constrained populations, and debatable social relevance” (Hantula, 2020, p.

690). Consequently, many of the pioneers of the behavioral community psychology initiative transitioned from behavior analysis and sought intellectual succor through other disciplines.

From the late 1990s through the early 2000s, there was less advancement and promotion of behavioral community psychology, particularly within behavior analysis, which may be related to several factors. First, some of the early adopters of the behavioral community approach experienced fatigue due to the challenges and tensions experienced in advancing an emergent, multidisciplinary approach. Second, behavior analysts did not always find behavioral community research to be rewarded through the traditional scholarly mechanisms related to publishing and presenting at conferences. Thus, during this time, individuals and groups promoting behavioral community approaches continued to advance the work, but it became more broadly distributed across journals, conferences, and training in disciplines outside of the ABA, in which engaging in behavioral community approaches was reinforced. Over time, the term “behavioral community” was less frequently referenced in applied behavior analysis and community psychology (Harzing, 2007). The application of behavioral community interventions and practice continued but through less of an intentional and formally recognized approach. Although there was a lull in the coordinated advancement of behavioral community psychology in applied behavior analysis and community psychology, those committed to this subspecialty area continued to train students (see Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2019), work as behavioral community researchers and practitioners, and more subtly advance the approach with partners in communities.

In the early to mid-2000s, multidisciplinary interest prompted some expansion of behavioral community approaches into other disciplines that focused on addressing community and societal issues, including in public health and prevention science. For instance, there was a special issue on “Applied Behavior Analysis: Understanding and Changing Behavior in the Community” in the *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community* (Luyben, 2009). There are proponents of behavioral approaches who are active within the Society for Prevention Research (e.g., Anthony Biglan, Dennis Embry, Robert Horner) and champions in public health fields for the integration of behavioral community approaches (see Hovell et al., 2009; Lutzker & Whitaker, 2005). In addition, several scholars have advocated for the applications of behavioral science approaches to injury prevention (see Gershater-Molko et al., 2002; Gielen & Sleet, 2003).

Although there has been interest in behavioral community approaches across various disciplines, in recent years there has been less of a coordinated and intentional approach for advancing behavioral community applications collectively within and across our disciplines. The result is a broader diffusion of behavioral community applications in research and practice but less collective recognition and understanding of how the science of behavior is contributing to addressing community and societal goals.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

Since 2015, behavioral community psychology has seen an uptick in promotion as an important and relevant subspecialty area. Books in both community psychology (see Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2019) and in applied behavior analysis (see Watson-Thompson et al., 2020) have included chapters on behavioral community psychology. At the biennial meeting of the Society for Community Research and Action, a roundtable discussion session was facilitated, “Where Do We Go From Here: Is There Still a Place for Behavioral Community Psychology?” (Watson-Thompson, Fawcett, et al., 2015b). Roundtable discussion participants involved proponents of behavioral community approaches, including Stephen Fawcett, David Glenwick, Lenny Jason, John Moritsugu, Vincent Francisco, Fabricio Balcazar, and Yolanda Suarez-Balcazar, among other colleagues who at the time were more newly minted and trained as behavioral community psychologists, including Jomella Watson-Thompson, Daryl Stewart, Priya Vanchy, and Kaston Anderson-Carpenter.

Recommendations from the roundtable session are being supported by this special issue in BSI. These include (a) using consistent key search terms across the disciplines when publishing behavioral community research, (b) publishing special sections or issues in journals to promote increased awareness of behavioral community research that is now more dispersed across disciplines, and (c) aligning behavioral-community-oriented special interest groups (e.g., BFSR) across disciplines to promote interactions and shared work. For instance, the BFSR’s Matrix Project (<https://bfsr.abainternational.org/the-matrix-project/>) aims to advance behavior-analytic research and application of social issues across systems or sectors, which could be furthered through this type of intentional cross-disciplinary collaboration with like-minded special interest groups (Luke et al., 2017; Watson-Thompson et al., 2020). In fact, in recent years, the BFSR has actively promoted behavioral community psychology and related approaches.

## Lessons Learned

If past behavior is indeed the best predictor of future behavior, then there is much to be learned from our history of advancing behavioral community psychology. As we face both persistent and new societal problems related to the COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustices, climate crises, and socioeconomic inequities, it is imperative that we collectively offer our most effective collaborative solutions within and across our research and practice communities. The time is now to harmonize and reconcile our approaches, including through behavioral community psychology, so that we may contribute to collective problem solving with our communities and across our disciplines and fields. The promotion of behavioral community approaches in behavior analysis, community psychology, and other similar disciplines such as prevention science and public health will require those uncommitted to disciplines and ideology to be willing to collectively contribute within and across multiple fields in addressing the “wicked problems” that resist resolution (cf. Rittel & Webber, 1973).

In behavior analysis, culturo-behavior science (CBS) recently has emerged as a way for behavior analysts to engage in social and cultural systems analyses (Cihon & Mattaini, 2020). Contemporary behavioral community psychology also strives to expand social justice through community empowerment, policy activism, and promotion of collective wellness (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2019)—all of which comports well with the CBS approach to social change. As this new area within behavior analysis grows, it will require active efforts to ensure that behavioral community psychology and other systemic approaches are integrated within the CBS framework as an area of aligned opportunity and growth. The current rising interest in CBS occasions an exciting opportunity in behavior analysis to revitalize behavioral community psychology as a subspecialty with a proven track record for behavior analysts to collaborate within and across disciplines in addressing systemic issues that underlie societal well-being. As CBS develops, it is prudent to increase the recognition of behavioral community psychology as an approach with great potential to contribute to the remediation of vexing social problems.

### **Purpose of the Special Issue: Revitalizing Behavioral Community Psychology**

Through this special issue on revitalizing behavioral community psychology, it is our endeavor to both recognize our past, maximize our present, and embrace future opportunities to advance social change and collaborative action. It is also important to actively demonstrate, welcome, and occasion the opportunity for scholars, researchers, practitioners, and community stakeholders who are interested in advancing behavioral community approaches to intentionally align around a common purpose and shared strategies.

As a commitment to furthering behavioral community approaches, BSI will regularly commission special issues and sections focused on advancing behavioral community psychology. It has been 30 years, which is far too long since behavioral community psychology was a visible subspecialty in behavioral journals. The last special issue in a behavioral journal that was specifically focused on behavioral community approaches was in 1991, when Scott Geller served as the editor of JABA and Charles Greenwood served as a guest action editor, with Stephen Fawcett and Leonard Jason among the contributors to the special section and issue.

It is both timely and intentional that this special section of BSI on revitalizing community psychology includes contributions from several of the early champions of the approach, including Stephen Fawcett, Charlie Greenwood, Scott Geller, David Glenwick, and Leonard Jason. The focus of this special section is to explore and promote the ways that behavioral community psychology can once again become a prominent contributor to addressing social problems. Each of these colleagues has maintained an active commitment to continuing to partner with and across communities, from local to global, in contributing to meaningful and sustained changes



in community conditions and outcomes through behavioral community research, instruction, and practice. As these change agents have demonstrated a long-term commitment to advancing community-engaged scholarship through both community stakeholders and university partnerships, it is fitting to recognize them for their enduring work in the subspecialty and as contributors to this special section.

The behavioral community psychology special section is divided into Part 1 (in this issue) and Part 2 to follow in early 2022. Part 1 contains contributions from many of the behaviorists who gained prominence decades ago as leaders in the then-nascent subfield. In the first article, Lenny Jason, Dave Glenwick,<sup>1</sup> and John Moritsugu review the tense alliance between behavior analysis and community psychology, focusing on theoretical, methodological, and contextual factors that impeded the growth of behavioral community psychology as a subfield in the past but may not be as challenging going forward. Stephen Fawcett provides a 50-year reflection on the evolving practice of research and action in supporting behavioral community approaches through multidisciplinary collaboration. Fawcett illustrates the widespread dissemination of behavioral technology through the Community Tool Box (<https://ctb.ku.edu/en>). Charles Greenwood et al. report their pilot work to prevent the “word gap” that is experienced more by children from economically disadvantaged environments relative to peers raised in more financially secure situations, by employing an approach that combines behavior analysis, community psychology, and a public health framework (Greenwood et al., 2017). Scott Geller provides a culmination of his experiences through more than 50 years of research and practice that are distilled in seven life lessons and illustrated through the Actively Caring for People (AC4P) Movement. Geller suggests other psychological disciplines in which it is important to collaborate through applied behavioral science in support of humanistic behavior, including humanism and positive psychology. Each of the articles indicates the importance of both multidisciplinary connections and broad dissemination of applied behavioral science to support widespread behavior change at the community and population levels.

Behavioral community psychology is now at a critical juncture, with genuine opportunities for growth and expansion in behavior analysis, community psychology, public health, prevention science, and perhaps other disciplines. However, it requires a firm commitment to both understanding and recognizing the unique value proposition it offers to and across disciplines. As affirmed in the early work of Scott Geller (1991), “identifying and improving the conditions and contingencies that enhance these antecedents of actively caring represent perhaps the most momentous and demanding challenge for contemporary behavioral community psychologists” (p. 611).

The integration of behavioral community psychology across and within disciplines requires that the subspecialty once again become a vital force (Jason et al., in this issue). Otherwise, as Bogat and Jason (2000) noted, “dogs bark at those they do

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<sup>1</sup> Dave passed away on July 27, 2021, after an 11-year battle with cancer. Despite his protestations to me (Richard F. Rakos) in summer 2020 that “my writing days are over,” it turns out that he had one more article in him. Dave was an exemplary academic, clinician, social activist, and friend. See <https://fordhamobserver.com/64196/news/david-s-glenwick-prolific-psychology-professor-dies-at-71/>

not recognize” (p. 101). As we consider the evolution of behavioral community psychology, there will be variation and selection, which is necessary; however, it is important to support the conditions that both protect it from mutation to an unrecognizable and likely less effective form of the subspecialty area and against unnecessary reinvention due to lost context and history. There is much to be learned from the history of behavioral community psychology as a forerunner of behavioral and interdisciplinary approaches to addressing social issues, which was at the intersection of behavior-analytic and community-engaged approaches. The science of behavior has much to offer in addressing community and societal issues, but it requires intentional and collaborative problem solving across disciplines, including in and with our culturo-behavior science communities through combined, integrated, and effective approaches.

**Supplementary Information** The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42822-021-00080-0>.

## Declarations

**Conflicts of interest** The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest that could be perceived as prejudicing the impartiality of the research reported.

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