



An Editorial on Revitalizing Behavioral Community Psychology: Where Are We Going Now?

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In the late 1960s, behavioral community psychology (BCP) formed as a subspecialty area that integrated behavior analysis with community psychology. The field gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s by expanding the ability of applied behavior scientists to address systemic social problems (Jason, 1977; Watson-Thompson et al., 2020). However, by the end of the twentieth century, BCP had become less salient in applied behavior analysis and community psychology, though it was still advanced through more diffused application across other disciplines, including prevention science and public health (Watson-Thompson et al., 2021).

Behavior and Social Issues has devoted a two-part special section of the journal toward revitalizing BCP by recognizing many of its early contributors while also demonstrating several current applications of the approach to advance social change. In Part I, early promoters of behavioral community approaches reflected on the challenges and opportunities facing the field. In this second part of the special section, examples are provided of contemporary behavioral community psychology efforts that support the advancement of culturo-behavioral science through the examination of systemic problems such as colonialism, racism, and homelessness.

In the first article of the series, Suarez-Balcazar et al. report the use of goal setting with Latinx parents of children with disabilities. They worked with immigrant families in the United States and low-income families in Columbia to promote positive lifestyle choices and fruitful discussion of difficult developmental issues like sexuality. Their two case studies are grounded in the values of BCP, including collaboration with the subjects of the investigations, and suggest that behavioral goal-setting can help caregivers attain current goals and prepare for future challenges.

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Vanchy Kadavasal and Watson-Thompson demonstrate the effects of a behavioral based community intervention to increase physical activity among youth in a local, low-income housing authority. They employ a technology-based preference assessment tool to identify appropriate reinforcers for youth in their natural setting. In addition to establishing marked increases in youth physical activity during their leisure time, Vanchy Kadavasal and Watson-Thompson also leverage existing collaborative partnerships with the local housing authority to ensure the intervention is culturally responsive. This work is especially important given the rising rates of childhood obesity and the racial and ethnic disparities that exist.

The issues encountered by a behavior analyst conducting field work as a behavioral community psychologist in the Amazon rainforest in northern Brazil are analyzed by da Silva and Leugi. Their examination of the cultural practices of, and the environment faced by, a semi-isolated Indigenous community generates specific implications for culturally competent practice. Foremost among their suggestions for behavior analysts working in the field, not surprisingly, is the development of meaningful relationships with those to be helped.

Smilak and Putnam highlight the negative impact of colonialism in the African continent, particularly through the lens of modern aid. They bring to the forefront not only the detrimental ramifications of western colonialism on helping, but they also provide a deep investigation into the reinforcement contingencies that perpetuate inequitable power dynamics between Western and African countries. For behavior analysts interested in helping others outside a colonialist approach, Smilak and Putnam posit that interventions should be cost-free, focus on effective behavior, integrate empowerment and collaboration, and plan for long-term sustainability

Switzer and Rakos describe the unintended but negative consequences of the Housing First/Rapid Rehousing policy, the current best practice approach to homelessness, on families who are unhoused as well as their service providers. They suggest that culturo-behavior science might contribute more to the amelioration of this “wicked” problem if it adopted the BCP approach with its emphases on collaboration that empowers the disadvantaged and on primary and secondary prevention of social problems. Switzer and Rakos apply a metacontingency analysis of the present Housing First/Rapid Rehousing policies to suggest practice changes that may improve outcomes for currently unhoused families.

Watson-Thompson and colleagues issue a clarion call to the field to leverage the strengths of applied behavioral science to address anti-Black racism through a social-ecological lens. Behaviorists can be critical allies in dismantling systemically oppressive structures rooted in anti-Blackness. By extension, dismantling such structures can liberate all communities and populations. Watson-Thompson and colleagues provide concrete tools to support behaviorists’ efforts in combating racism; they are centered around increasing knowledge and skills, enhancing services and supports, modifying functional relations via differential reinforcement, altering motivating operation, and modifying broader systems. The authors argue that this behavioral approach can support existing and future efforts that address anti-Black racism in numerous contexts and thereby facilitate liberation for populations across the United States.

Finally, Alavosius and colleagues propose that BCP can enhance the experimental learning component of students studying culturo-behavior science and systems intervention by offering a framework for identifying and training core competencies. They utilize climate change as a focus area to provide an example of how BCP can help to clarify and measure criterion skills. Further, they argue that, within the BCP framework, culturo-behavior science concepts, measures, and procedures can help guide the selection, preparation, and assessment of practicum experiences to foster the application of behavior science to socially significant issues.

All seven of the articles in this second part of the special section highlight the values inherent in BCP, particularly the foundational bedrock principle of promoting open and egalitarian collaboration with the people who are to be the beneficiaries of intervention. Several also point out the critical importance of acquiring a full, almost anthropologically detailed functional and topographical understanding of the target behaviors and the contexts in which they are embedded (e.g., da Silva & Leugi; Switzer & Rakos). As noted earlier, while the articles in Part I offered the reflections of key BCP pioneers, the papers in Part II present contemporary BCP work that extends the approach to address a wider range of systemic problems in the United States and several other countries. In fact, while three of the articles in this collection address social inequities in the United States (racism, unhoused families, low income families), the other four have a full or partial international focus (Alavosius et al.; da Silva & Leugi; Smilak & Putnam; Suarez-Balcazar et al.). However, even with the exciting work described in these papers, there is a huge caveat: six of the papers present conceptual analyses or case studies and the seventh paper's laudable experimental controls still leave important interpretive limitations. What is needed next – consistent with the empirical tradition of BCP – are rigorous experimental investigations of systems-level interventions, an endeavor, admittedly, that is far easier said than done.

We hope this two-part special section will spur renewed interest in BCP – both in terms of conceptual examinations and empirical investigations. The revitalization of the field is now at a critical juncture within both applied behavior analysis and community psychology, with opportunities for integration in public health, prevention science, and other disciplines that impact community health, development, and well-being. Such integration can facilitate renewed recognition of the behavioral community approach as a vital force in addressing some of our most perplexing societal issues (Jason et al., 2021).

As this special section demonstrates, the global community continues to grapple with large-scale societal problems such as racial injustices, climate crises, and socio-economic inequities, all of which have been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. As scientists, practitioners, and citizens we must be willing to answer the clarion call to not only examine but also to actively address the inequities that persist within and across our fields and society (e.g., Watson-Thompson et al., 2022). As challenged by Skinner (1987), if we want to act to save the world, then it will require the contributions of scientists and practitioners who are “uncommitted” to disciplines and organizational affiliations and more committed to the shared goal of contributing to sustained improvements for a more just, equitable, and humane society.

Data Availability There are no data in this manuscript.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest There are no conflicts of interest for any of the authors.

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