Personal Agency in Feminist Theory: Evicting the Illusive Dweller

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The growing impact of feminist scholarship, activism, and politics would benefit substantially from input by radical behaviorists. The feminist community, broadly defined, and radical behaviorists share interesting commonalities that suggest a potentially fruitful alliance. There are, however, points of divergence that must be addressed; most prominently, the construct of personal agency. A behavioral reconstruction of personal agency is offered to deal with the invisible contingencies leading to gender-asymmetric interpretive repertoires. The benefits of a mutually informing fusion are discussed.

Key words: feminist theory, gender, person-situation dualism, agency, invisible contingencies, interpretive repertoires, verbal communities

In her book *Mismeasure of Woman*, Carol Tavris (1992) documents the often-cited work of Samuel Cartwright, a noted American physician who in the early 1800s studied and described a mental illness that was prevalent among slaves. He named this condition Drapetomania. The interesting thing about this condition was that it was diagnosed by a single symptom, namely, the uncontrollable tendency to run away from slavery (pp. 176–177). Could we write fiction to be this interesting? Alas, Cartwright pathologized the reasonable response of the slave, and in so doing, left the institution of slavery unexamined. Tavris goes on to show, as others have, how psychological science has historically followed a similar approach in its construction of woman and gender.

The feminist critique of science came to my attention several years ago as I began to explore disciplinary frontiers in order to develop a new elective course for our undergraduate psychology curriculum. As a behavior analyst teaching undergraduates in a liberal arts institution, I realized that some of my most engaging intellectual conversations were with feminist colleagues from disciplines other than psychology. I decided to focus on the existing feminist psychological literature and eventually developed a course I entitled "Women: Psychology's Challenge."

As I explored the feminist psychological literature, particularly its critique of traditional psychological science, I realized two things. First, and I felt very enthusiastic about this point, the feminist critique of traditional psychological science was, in some ways, remarkably consistent with the radical behaviorist critique.

The second point was distressing yet ironically familiar. Radical behaviorism, the philosophy of science articulated by Skinner and the conceptual framework for behavior analysis, was among the "traditional" psychological models most poignantly criticized by feminists. I say that this last point was ironically familiar because as Todd and Morris (1983, 1992) have documented, Skinner's radical behaviorism has been consistently misrepresented as Watsonian methodological behaviorism throughout the psychological literature. It was therefore not surprising, and perhaps to be ex-

pected, that this culturally received view of radical behaviorism be the one incorporated in feminist critiques as well. Rhoda Unger (1988), whose work has been inspirational to my own even though we have divergent points of view, perhaps better than anyone articulates this culturally received view. Although not as widely quoted by feminists as reflections on her years at Harvard as a graduate student in Skinner's laboratory where "even the rats were male" (Unger, 1989, p. 15), Unger's observation that "the juxtaposition of the words 'behaviorism' and 'the study of women' seems to some of us to be a contradiction in terms" (p. 125) succinctly captures the spirit of the feminist reaction to behaviorism.

My first reaction to Unger and other feminists was to shut my eyes and plug my ears as children sometimes do in the hopes that something annoying will go away, but when I released my senses the received view was still there. So it seemed not only reasonable, but the indicated course in terms of my teaching, to begin by addressing the unfortunate problem of mistaken identities. Therefore, part of my work in this area has been aimed at clarifying the distinctions between the two strains of behaviorism. But what is more interesting is to move beyond clarification to elaborate on substantive issues on which radical behaviorism and feminist thinking are congenially aligned.

In this paper I will illustrate how a feminist critique combined with a radical behavioral analysis can yield productive results. Specifically, the differential effects of discriminative contingencies invisibly embedded in some cultural practices often result in gender-asymmetric interpretations of those practices. An example that most of us are familiar with is the notion of politically correct talk. The insistence by feminists that we change our verbal practices to become more inclusive has been trivialized and satirized, as typified by Rush Limbaugh's description of "femi-nazis." Have feminists gone too far, or do the gender-specific exclu-

sionary effects of our verbal practices require change? A behavioral analysis of invisible contingencies and interpretive repertoires can lead to a cohesive understanding of the dynamics of this problem that can help us begin to answer the question. There are numerous points of convergence between radical behaviorism and the feminist perspective, broadly defined, that suggest a potentially productive merger. I will begin by discussing these. At the same time there are fundamental tensions that must be addressed as a precondition to a successful synthesis, and a discussion of these follows. I then examine the merits of a merger and present the case of invisible contingencies and interpretive repertoires. I conclude with a preliminary construction of a feminist radical behaviorist perspective.

CONVERGENCE OF FEMINIST THEORY AND RADICAL BEHAVIORISM

I begin by highlighting what I understand to be the most important points of convergence between radical behaviorism and feminist theory (Ruiz, 1995). This will give us a context from which to address specific details on the ways, means, and benefits of working towards a mutually informing alliance.

First, radical behaviorists and feminists agree on the importance of context in understanding human action. Thus, both reject psychological approaches that decontextualize individuals and fail to take into account the conditions of people's lives. A second and related point is their rejection of the notion that the scientist, or knower, is separate from the subject of inquiry, or that which is known. Both radical behaviorists and feminists emphasize the relational character of the process of knowing, and recognize that the scientist and the perspectives that he or she brings to bear on the subject are important considerations.

Consequently, and as a final point to highlight, radical behaviorists and fem-

inists recognize the social nature of scientific knowledge, the status of which is inextricably connected to and not separate from the activity of scientists. Therefore, the work of science is not about establishing ultimate and transcendental truths, but is rather a practical matter and is about determining what works given the problem and the questions that it raises.

Besides these conceptual junctures, there are other common grounds shared by these two scholarly communities that I have discussed in detail (Ruiz, 1992, 1995, 1996; Ruiz & Tallen, 1993) and are worth mentioning here. Originating from common intellectual roots, both communities share the assumption that experience plays a central role in human development. As such, both share a belief in the transformative possibilities of human life and an optimistic philosophy of social change. Both feminism and radical behaviorism advocate a view of human behavior and development that emphasizes the contextual interconnectedness of individuals with their social and physical realities. Both groups would agree on the value of an educated understanding of our mutual interconnectedness in promoting humanistic practices and values. Accordingly, both communities have challenged the dominant worldview that deemphasizes or ignores altogether the powerful influences of external forces, and both have consequently faced similar problems of acceptance. In fact, both communities have been and continue to be marginalized by gatekeepers of mainstream psychology, but both have defied marginalization. In so doing, both communities have endeavored to create social changes and advocated the restructuring of environments across the whole spectrum of social institutions, from the classroom to the work place to the family unit, to create better learning opportunities for all participants.

Indeed, a mutually informing fusion between feminist psychology and radical behaviorism has much promise. I will elaborate on what I see as key aspects of this fusion, and why it would be in our mutual interests to look to one another as allies, both intellectually and pragmatically. But before doing so let us to pause to examine major points of divergence between our verbal communities.

MAJOR POINTS OF DIVERGENCE BETWEEN FEMINIST THEORY AND RADICAL BEHAVIORISM

Before elaborating on key distinctions, it is prudent to remind the reader that the feminist community is highly diverse (cf. Herrmann & Stewart, 1994; Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 1998; Reinharz, 1992). Any attempt to speak of this group as a monolithic entity would be misguided. Nevertheless, there are themes that predominate in feminist discourse, one of which is the construct of personal agency. The pervasive influence of this illusive dweller in feminist theory is related to the emphasis on individualism, at the expense of context, within traditional psychological models. Within the psychology of women and feminist theory, this prejudice manifests itself as a "pervasive but implicit emphasis" on liberal feminism (Crowley-Long, 1998, p. 113). Disparate views on personal agency represent a fundamental tension between radical behaviorism and feminist theory. Ironically, although the resolution of this conceptual tension presents a formidable challenge, it is a necessary step if we are to achieve a successful merger and a widely accepted working alliance. Despite the conceptual problems that our standard western understanding of personal agency poses for feminists, many feminists nevertheless retain this conceptualization as a working assumption. Let us examine the problems more closely.

Person–Situation Dualism and Personal Agency

Similar to its function in mainstream psychology, the self-actional agent as

locus of awareness and action has played the role of guardian of personal choice in feminist theory. Feminists look to the agent as the ultimate source of feminist resistance, a crucial process in feminist activism. At the same time feminists believe in the power of social controls and are committed to exposing the external sources of power and control that limit opportunities for individuals in society. Feminists want to change our society's institutions in order to create better opportunities for all who live in it. As such, feminists are committed to the transformative possibilities of human life and an optimistic philosophy of social change.

Feminists then find themselves in a unique position to be arguing for the existence of what appears to be conceptually conflicting sources of behavioral control, namely, the power of social forces to oppress the individual and the power of the individual or agent to resist such oppression. The conceptual tensions created by these coexisting beliefs have served as a great challenge to feminist scholars, some of whom have attempted to reconcile the two within conceptual paradigms that simply cannot provide adequate grounds for reconciliation. Specifically, feminist scholars have struggled to find solutions within a conceptual framework that assumes person–situation dualism as the mechanism for preserving the Cartesian agent while arguing for social control. But in the struggle to retain that Cartesian agent, these feminists run into serious conceptual conflicts. Let me briefly mention four.

Conceptual conflicts in feminist theory. First, a hallmark of feminist scholarship has been its challenge of Cartesian dualities and the false dichotomies and myths that are based on these dualities. The feminist critique of science, for example, has exposed the pervasive impact of gender ideology on our scientific knowledge base. Science's masculinist perspective includes value-laden Cartesian splits between who can know (the scientist vs. the subject), what can be known and the relative status of such knowledge (objective vs. subjective reality), and how we can come to know it (intuition vs. reason as tools for acquiring knowledge). The generic feminist critique of dualism on epistemological grounds notwithstanding, person–situation dualism is well embedded in much feminist writing.

Second, person–situation dualism is kindred with another form of dualism that is of special interest and poses specific concerns to feminists and behaviorists alike, namely the nature–nurture dichotomy. In psychological science, essentialist ideologies such as biological determinism have historically masqueraded as the self-actional agent in the person–situation duality. This camouflage, as I will illustrate, has escaped even some feminists who reject essentialism in favor of social constructionism, making claims that are conceptually indefensible and unsustainable.

Third, the self-actional agent has been a convenient locus of proximal causation in psychological theory. Invoking it as such feeds into and promotes the "billiard ball" mechanistic model of causation, which has been the prevalent explanatory model in psychology and which feminist critics have widely and ardently attacked.

Finally, the self-actional agent creates some serious conceptual traps for the feminist critique of traditional psychological models that focus on the individual and exclude or ignore social and political influences on development. Specifically, many feminists maintain that the individual as agent constructs reality and creates personal change in spite of social controls. Let me elaborate on the conceptual traps with an illustration.

Unger (1988), for example, casts the problems in terms of personal epistemologies. The conceptual dilemma she elaborates goes something like this: If we extend the argument that the individual as agent constructs his or her own reality, it is possible to conclude that "reality is all in one's head." Unger herself notes the problem that if

reality is all in one's head, how do we explore a shared reality, including social controls that affect members of some social groups uniformly and selectively (e.g., how sexist practices affect women's behavior)? In reconciling agency and social control, Unger writes that it is noteworthy that feminists who are social activists and agents of social change appear to be able to maintain a contradictory cognitive schema, which may be particularly adaptive to a contradictory reality.

From a behavioral perspective I would argue that the agent-based cognitive solution spoken in terms of contradictory cognitive schemas and realities is itself problematic. For one, it leaves open the question "under what conditions or situations is a particular cognitive schema activated?"

Feminist praxis. But even if we could determine the conditions that "call forth" or set the occasion for a particular cognitive schema, we would still have some practical questions to answer. That is, the cognitive solution is at worst problematic and at best incomplete from the perspective of feminist praxis. Consider, for example, two practical goals of feminist practice. One is to empower individuals and increase individual resistance to oppressive cultural practices. A second goal is to create a feminist epistemology or way of knowing that gives voice to how women experience the world and with which to analyze how gender as an epistemological system works to frame our experiences as women (Kaschak, 1992; Unger, 1990).

Returning to Unger's solutions, knowing the conditions that set the occasion for a particular cognitive schema to come into play still leaves unanswered the questions of just how contradictory cognitive schemas and realities develop. It also leaves unanswered the question of how these actually operate to facilitate or mediate feminist resistance or what we might call *agentic action.*

WHAT DOES FEMINISM HAVE TO OFFER RADICAL BEHAVIORISTS AND BEHAVIOR ANALYSTS?

Let us consider how a feminist perspective might contribute to work conducted in the behavior-analytic tradition. This is an important area of discussion to me because behaviorist colleagues often reply to feminist analysis by asking "Well, do we really *need* feminism? What can it add? After all, when properly understood behavior analysis is gender neutral and does not presuppose any particular set of values." So let me share why I believe that we would benefit from a feminist perspective, in spite of the fact that these claims may be true in principle if not in practice.

In addressing how a feminist perspective might contribute to work conducted in the behavior-analytic tradition, I will not focus on the specific types of research questions that a feminist researcher might address using behavior analysis as the methodological tool. Although in all honesty this might be the easier task, what I actually want to focus on is how the orienting assumptions that guide feminist work might affect how a behavior analyst looks at and approaches potential questions to research in virtually any area. With that in mind, let me spell out two such assumptions that I will work from in addressing the pertinence of a feminist perspective. First is the notion that scientific activity is not value free or gender neutral, and that scientific inquiry must include examination of both values and gender. The second assumption is that scientific activity is a means to achieving solutions to practical problems and as such it is also political activity.

Although these orienting assumptions do not themselves define or delineate research areas, they certainly influence the researcher's point of view. As such, they can encourage us to ask certain questions about the research setting or context of discovery,

for example "is our environmental configuration gendered, and if so, how might this influence our outcomes?" We might also ask questions about the research process itself. For instance, in relation to the context of justification and in keeping with our "truth criterion" of effective action, we might ask, "What are the cultural values reflected in our definitions of effective action with respect to discriminatory cultural practices?" Here feminists would agree with Rogers (1966) that "the value or purpose that gives meaning to a particular endeavor must always lie outside that endeavor" (p. 310). We might also ask "On whose behalf are we functioning effectively, and who benefits directly? Who benefits indirectly?" Along the same lines we might continue, "Are there any hidden costs to particular individuals or groups resulting from this effective action?" As I will illustrate later, "invisible" contingencies are most problematic to identify and deal with in this area. Finally, "What classes of cultural practices are we selecting and what, if any, gender-related metacontingencies are we affecting?" Certainly behavior analysts concerned with social validity ask these general types of questions (Kazdin, 1977; Wolf, 1978). But I believe, and will try to show, that a feminist perspective brings a special prism to bear and leads to specific types of questions that might not otherwise suggest themselves as obvious pauses for further inquiry.

I will be more specific later when I discuss a concrete illustration, but first let me say a couple of words about the assumptions themselves. One of the things I have found most enlightening in reading the feminist critique of science is its sophisticated unveiling of well-hidden assumptions that demand new interpretations of old "facts." Feminists have analyzed and disentangled controlling relations in scientific work to expose how gender and gendered arrangements affect our scientific knowing. Moreover, they have shown how gender can influence our research find-

ings while remaining invisible as a source of control (e.g., Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, & Vogel, 1970; Collins, 1998; Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). If a feminist perspective were to do no more than set the occasion for identifying such sources of invisible control, then this would be sufficient grounds for encouraging the feminist perspective among behavior analysts. But there is more to offer.

Of even more immediate practical importance is feminists' focus on how discriminatory cultural practices work to disempower certain groups. Of particular interest to feminists is how discriminatory practices are invisibly and seamlessly woven into well-established cultural practices that are widely accepted and, it would seem, acceptable to the mainstream in our culture. Feminist analyses are designed to dissect such practices and expose the problems.

But doing so is often easier said than done, because the literal invisibility of discriminatory practices makes the exposing a difficult challenge. Specifically, discriminatory practices may be visible to or discriminated by some, though not all, members of a social group who by virtue of their membership in that group are adversely affected by the practice. Members of the dominant group, on the other hand, for whom the practice is established and who are favored or accommodated by the practice are less likely to see the practice as discriminatory in the sociopolitical sense. This social blindness by members of the dominant group who are accommodated by the practice is likely related to the absence of discriminative contingencies that might make the differentially oppressive effects of the practice visible.

But the problem grows even further in complexity as individuals who are differentially affected engage in verbal exchanges about such practices. Specifically, the highly selective effects of subtle discriminatory practices may make it difficult, if not impossible, for a member of a group adversely affect-

ed by the practice to actually communicate effectively about it with a member of the dominant group not adversely affected. The notion of the so-called "chilly climate" in the classroom for female students is a good illustration of this because of the subtlety of the practices that create such a climate. The courts have now come to appreciate this very point. Whereas in the past such perceptions might have been put to the "reasonable person test," the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals recognized the need for a "reasonable woman standard" in *Ellison v. Brady* (1991). In this decision the court recognized that the perception of a subtle discriminatory practice as such might be different for men and women. That is, what a reasonable woman may "see" and interpret as sexist and oppressive, a reasonable man might not. Writing for the majority, Circuit Judge Beezer explains that

A complete understanding of the victim's view requires, among other things, an analysis of the different perspectives of men and women. Conduct that many men consider unobjectionable may offend many women. . . . We adopt the perspective of a reasonable woman primarily because we believe that a sex-blind reasonable person standard tends to be male-biased and tends to systematically ignore the experiences of women. (p. 7)

Justice Beezer clearly recognized that the nuances of interpretation are related to a person's experiences. His articulation of this important point is compatible with a behavior-analytic interpretation of interpretive repertoires. Specifically, whether an individual interprets a cultural practice as offensive, oppressive, or objectionable has everything to do with the effects of those practices on the person's behavior. Although direct experience may be sufficient, it is not necessary, because rules concerning those relations may also reveal the practice to be objectionable. To better understand how members of different social groups may come to see and label cultural practices differently, it is helpful to examine the interactive dynamics of interpretive repertoires with concrete examples.

ON THE INVISIBILITY OF DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES AS STIMULUS CLASSES

Hineline's (1992) analysis of interpretive repertoires as they relate to different situations is extremely helpful in understanding how environmental arrangements might render discriminatory practices "invisible" to some interpreters but not others. Hineline asks us to consider the case of a color-blind experimenter who attempts to assess and interpret the wavelength sensitivities of a participant with trichromatic vision without the benefit or aid of specialized instruments. Imagine further that you are an observer who, like the participant of the experiment, has trichromatic vision, and who is unaware that our experimenter is color-blind. As you try to make sense of the experimenter's interpretations of the participant's discriminations, you may conclude that our experimenter is dense or foolish in denying the validity of the discriminations the participant is obviously making. And you might ask yourself, in a figurative sense, "Is she blind?"

On the other hand, imagine if our experimenter was the only individual with trichromatic vision. Imagine further that everyone else was color-blind, including the participant and you, the observer who is trying to make sense of the experimenter's interpretations. In this case you would be justifiably likely to conclude that there must be something wrong with the experimenter who is after all insisting on distinctions that do not make sense to anyone else. In this case you might ask yourself, "Is she crazy?"

Hineline's illustrations provide helpful examples of complexities that can emerge when stimulus control relations that influence repertoires of discrimination and generalization of the interpreter and the participant whose dis-

criminative responding he or she is interpreting (i.e., the interpretee) are different. In Hineline's examples certain wavelength values will remain invisible to the individual who is color-blind. And the participant with trichromatic vision may not be able to appropriately affect her listener as she tries to communicate to the color-blind interpreter the stimulus classes that are operative for her. Conversely, a color-blind interpreter may simply not see, and therefore, not get the stimulus control relations that are operative for the participant with trichromatic vision whose repertoire he or she is interpreting.

Now I want to borrow Hineline's illustration and apply the terms *trichromatic vision* and *color blindness* in a rather loose metaphor to illustrate how the same types of complexities, or disequilibria, may emerge with stimulus control relations that involve cultural practices, rather than wavelength, as the stimulus class. This scenario illustrates how cultural practices may come to be labeled discriminatory, or interpreted as different, by individuals from one group while remaining invisible as such to members of another.

The Bathroom

This scenario comes from a story that my father tells about a personal experience. Our family emigrated from Cuba to the United States in the 1960s, and once in the U.S. my father entered a residency program in pathology in a central Florida hospital in order to validate his medical degree. At the time, the men's bathrooms in the hospital were labeled in one of two ways: either "men" or "colored men." The bathroom closest to the laboratory where my father worked and the one he used consistently was designated "colored men." The racial designation and the cultural practices signified by the labels were not familiar to my father at first; that is, he could not tact these. Our family is of Euro-American descent, and it wasn't long before he dis-

covered that, culturally speaking, he was entering the wrong bathroom.

Applying the term *trichromatic vision* in a loose metaphor, if my father were the subject of observation in an investigation, and the experimenter or interpreter were a North American scientist with trichromatic vision, culturally speaking, the experimenter might well wonder whether my father was "colored blind." This question would be most likely if the interpreter had no information about my father's cultural history. The resulting disequilibrium in stimulus control relations governing their respective repertoires in this case involves a class of environmental events that are culturally peculiar to and characteristic of the interpreter's behavior (i.e., the experimenter observing and describing my father) but not of the interpretee's (i.e., my father's) behavior.

Now imagine the reverse, that is, my father observing a colleague, also of Euro-American descent but with culturally sensitive lenses. This colleague walks three times as far as he to go to the bathroom for no apparent reason. My father might interpret his behavior as strange, and wonder why this colleague is "going out of his way" to use the bathroom. It is unlikely that my father would interpret his colleague's behavior as "sensitive" to subtle cultural expectations.

INTERPRETIVE REPERTOIRES APPLIED TO INVISIBILITY

Discriminatory cultural practices are seldom as conspicuously labeled as were the segregated bathrooms in the 1960s. As sources of behavioral control, these practices tend instead to be inconspicuously embedded in standard cultural practices. Feminist psychologists' primary research interest has been the analysis of gender, as well as other socially constructed categories such as race and class. They have argued that gender and other culturally constructed categories are transmitted through cultural practices. Moreover,

one's gender or race strongly influences the conceptual classes that come to control one's behavior in keeping with such practices. In fact, researchers have shown that these conceptual classes are, in many instances, different for men and women (Bosmajian, 1995; Richardson, 1997) and for blacks and whites (Moore, 1995; Scheurich, 1993).

The Classroom

Consider a more typical example of the subtlety and invisibility of discriminatory cultural practices. This scenario comes from a story that a colleague of mine tells about a graduate student at her university. My colleague and another department member, both of whom teach in their university's women's studies program, held an informal discussion group for graduate students interested in feminist issues. The group met weekly, and Sandy, a doctoral student in psychology, came to the group on a regular basis. One afternoon Sandy came into the meeting a few minutes late. She was upset and having a difficult time connecting with the discussion, rare in her case because she was typically an energetic and assertive leader in discussions.

The group asked Sandy what was the matter and she gasped for words. She was upset about some things that had happened in her Individual Psychotherapy class, but she was not clear about what specifically had upset her. She talked with some friends after class to see if they had had similar reactions. They too were feeling strange, but were not sure why. This lack of clarity in the students' understanding turns out to be a very important point that I'll return to.

The group continued to listen and to ask questions. "What happened in class today?" The professor had shown an old but classic film on the topic of psychotherapy that was upsetting to Sandy. The film was made in the early 1960s (same period as the bathroom signs) and displayed outdated fashions and outdated cultural stereotypes that have changed over the past 30 some years. Nevertheless, the film is a classic and contains three segments with Fritz Perls, Carl Rogers, and Albert Ellis working with the same female patient whose name is Gloria, and illustrating how their particular brand of therapy—gestalt, client-centered, and rational emotive therapy, respectively—is done. The group tried to help Sandy decipher her feelings and relate them to what had gone on in the class. It was not simple for her to make connections. She knew "how" she felt, but she was having a very difficult time specifying why and putting words to it. This is, once again, an important point for our analysis.

Eventually the group discovered that there were two aspects of the classroom situation that had set the occasion for her reaction. First was the content of the film. The film depicted a young female patient who came to therapy because she felt depressed. Gloria was a divorced mother with two children to care for. The divorce had created financial circumstances that forced her to work outside the home. She felt guilty about having to leave the children to go to work. She also felt guilty because she had begun to date for the first time since her divorce, and was concerned that working and dating made her a "bad mother."

All three therapists responded to the patient by directing their attention at strategies for coping with the guilt and depression. Sandy pointed out that this poor woman had a right to be depressed given the situation she was in, and it added insult to injury that she should feel guilty that the situation rendered her a "bad mother." Yet none of the therapists focused on or even picked up on the patient's problematic situation or context. None challenged the notion that a working mother is a "bad mother" or that a single mother who dates is irresponsible. The cultural stereotypes that help to create and exacerbate this woman's stress remained invisible to the therapists, and her pa-

thology was the exclusive focus of their respective therapeutic interventions.

The group suggested to Sandy that the film was outdated, it was filmed in the 1960s, after all, and things had changed. My colleague then asked her if she had shared her misgivings with the professor and the rest of the class. The group then discovered the second aspect of the situation that had upset Sandy. After the film ended, the professor asked the class to determine which of the three therapists each student would pick to go to for therapy, and why. Sandy was sure that she would not pick any of them. She made an attempt to communicate this to the professor and the class, but she was unclear when she tried to explain why she was having negative reactions. In fact she realized that she did not have a clear understanding herself of the reasons for her reactions. The professor gently steered Sandy and the class to focus on the question he had posed, "Of the three alternatives, which would you pick, and why?" Sandy felt silenced, disempowered, and confused. "Not only had the therapists in the film missed the point," said Sandy to the group, "but so did our professor."

The scenario is a powerful illustration of how hidden assumptions leading to subtle discriminatory practices can remain invisible as such. These may be particularly likely to remain invisible to members of a group not directly affected by them. In this scenario Gloria's "problems" were understood by all authority figures, the therapists and professor alike, in much the same way that Cartwright had understood the problems of runaway slaves nearly 200 years ago. That is, they were legitimate problems that the individual should address and solve for herself in this case, with the help of a therapist. Sandy's view that the woman's troubles are related to the problematic nature of women's roles in our society and the social construction of the "good mother" remained unarticulated. The locus of the problem, as

defined by the authority figures in the film and the classroom, was the patient herself. A focus on the patient as the source of the problem is tacit if not explicit acceptance of the assumptions that a working divorced mother who dates is a bad mother in our culture. Moreover, it is also implicitly assumed that she does well to seek individual psychotherapy to deal with the anxieties and depression that such behaviors not surprisingly occasion.

Note the complementary treatments of this situation by feminist theory and radical behaviorism. A feminist analysis of the scenario exposes the assumptions embedded in these cultural practices, whereas a behavioral analysis of the interpretative repertoires of the objecting student and the affirming professor helps us to understand the sources of the disequilibrium in the two repertoires. Specifically, and to put it in terms of the metaphor we used before, the disequilibrium involves the repertoire of a student with culturally speaking trichromatic vision who "sees" subtle discriminatory practices and tacts them as such. It also involves the repertoire of a professor who is in turn "color blind" and for whom these practices, as such, remain invisible.

AGENCY: A RADICAL BEHAVIORIST RECONSTRUCTION

Sandy's dilemma brings into focus a class of educational practices feminists refer to as the *hidden curriculum*. The term is somewhat misleading in that it may suggest gratuitous intentionality on the part of the educational establishment. In fact, the hidden curriculum can be described as a class of educational practices that have differential effects on the behavior of male and female students (Association of American University Women, 1995). However, the overwhelming majority of teachers are unable to tact the differential reinforcement contingencies they administer (e.g. Eccles, 1992; Spender, 1982). Therefore, differential selection

as a practice transmitted through the hidden curriculum remains largely invisible to students and teachers of both sexes. Feminist praxis encourages us to ask questions such as "How do we teach students and teachers to become aware of these effects? How do we promote resistance to these practices by students and teachers alike?"

It is my contention that a behavior-analytic perspective is the appropriate tool with which to address these feminist concerns. Moreover, this presents an opportune juncture for radical behaviorists to engage the feminist verbal community in a conversation. However, for the conversation to proceed productively, a complete reworking of the view of the individual as self-actional agent is necessary. The view of the individual as locus of agency and awareness must be transformed so that we can begin to speak about tacting repertoires as potentially agentic action and the role of the verbal community in their emergence. Let us be more specific.

When we speak of agency from a radical behaviorist perspective, we speak of acts in context. Agency is not seen as a characteristic of the individual, but rather as a characteristic of acts. Agency, therefore, is action, and agent acts can be distinguished from nonagent acts in that agent acts include awareness or "knowing that" one's actions are related to key aspects of the current circumstance, and the individual can give an explanation relating the act in context. In other words, agent acts incorporate a verbal repertoire for naming or, as Skinner referred to it, tacting stimulus conditions that set the occasion for the act as well as its functions.

Feminist Praxis

Given this reworking of agency, let us return briefly to issues of feminist praxis, which I raised earlier in this paper. The development of feminist voice or resistance, or to use Skinner's term *countercontrol,* is critical in the femi-

nist agenda. Therefore, a key question to ask is "can the behavioral reconceptualization of agency help us understand how to facilitate the development of these agentic acts?" I believe it can in the following way. Feminist resistance requires the convergence of two distinct but related repertoires which together function as the locus of agency. First, the repertoire "knowing how" is acquired through direct experience. Second, the repertoire "knowing that" enables us to explain an act of resistance and its functional relation to external, contextual circumstances. Beyond direct experience, verbal explanations require socially mediated learning and a verbal community that can mediate such learning.

I now return to the case of Sandy to illustrate. First, Sandy experienced feelings of discomfort in the classroom but she could not explain them; that is, she knew "how" she felt, but she could not articulate why. So when she tried to speak in the classroom, she was unclear to the professor. The professor, in turn "not seeing" her point, steered the class back to what he wished them to focus on, that is "which therapist would you choose and why?" There was no opportunity in this situation for Sandy to come to "know that" her feelings were specifically related to the disequilibrium between her own interpretation of Gloria's problems and the therapists'.

The second important point is that following the classroom discussion Sandy felt even worse, because now her interpretative repertoire was out of sync with that of yet another authority figure, the professor. Far from facilitating the emergence of agentic voice, in the behavioral sense, the classroom experience inadvertently silenced Sandy's voice and blocked the emergence of what feminists call resistance.

This takes us back to the issues raised earlier. We know that an overarching goal of feminist research is to develop a feminist epistemology that can address how gender operates as an epistemological system to frame wom-

en's experiences and their interpreta-
tions of those experiences (Kaschak,
1992; Unger, 1990). The behaviorist
conceptual framework and behavior-
analytic tools can be brought to bear
on this problem in a number of ways.
To illustrate, radical behaviorists un-
derstand subjective knowledge or self-
knowledge to be socially constructed
and originating within the verbal com-
munity. Skinner's (1974) treatment of
self-knowledge is particularly useful
here as he described that

Self knowledge is of social origin. It is only
when a person's private world becomes impor-
tant to others that it is made important to him
(sic). [Nonetheless] self-knowledge has a special
value to the individual himself. A person who
has been made "aware of himself" by the ques-
tions he has been asked is in a better position to
predict and control his own behavior. (p. 31)

The focus of analysis, in turn, is on the
contingencies set up by the verbal
community in the development of such
knowledge. The tools of behavior anal-
ysis may prove to be valuable in un-
veiling relations that work to establish
and transmit gender as an epistemolog-
ical system influencing how women
and men live, become aware of their
experiences, and interpret them.

Sandy's small but critical feminist
verbal community kept probing and
asking her the kinds of questions that
led her to become aware of the rela-
tions between her private responses
and the events in the classroom. These
questions set the occasion for her
"knowing that" she was responding to
relationships the professor did not see.
Not only did her feminist verbal com-
munity help Sandy tact important stim-
ulus control relations, but members
also validated these through shared ex-
periences of disequilibrium and silenc-
ing.

*Mediating Tacting Repertoires or
Helping the Blind to "See"*

Because feminists and behaviorists
are interested in effective action, we
must reflect on what sorts of effective
action this conceptual analysis might
recommend. Specifically, what kinds

of experiences might be sufficient to
facilitate the acquisition of tacting rep-
ertoires or the double vision that we
have discussed? For example, what
minimal experiences might we expose
our professor to in order to bring his
interpretive repertoire and Sandy's into
equilibrium? This is the type of ques-
tion that feminists involved with con-
sciousness raising have asked for over
30 years.

Having defined the task as involving
the emergence of tacting repertoires,
we might proceed to recommend the
use of training films with scenarios
similar to Sandy's that set the occasion
for gender-related asymmetrical inter-
pretations. Viewing the film would
then be followed by verbal interactions
designed to bring into focus and tact
gender-related stimulus classes embed-
ded in the actors' repertoires. Ultimate-
ly, the emergence and maintenance of
such repertoires, or double visions, will
relate back to the metacontingencies
that are operative within organizations
that select for them. Behavior analysts
who work within organizations includ-
ing education, industry, and the mili-
tary are in a unique position to affect
relevant cultural practices beyond ear-
lier efforts at simple consciousness
raising with the tools of cultural anal-
ysis (Biglan, 1988; Glenn, 1985, 1988;
Glenn & Malagodi, 1991; Malagodi &
Jackson, 1989; Mattaini, 1996).

CONCLUSION

The time is ripe for radical behav-
iorists to join the conversation on fem-
inist issues that is entering its fifth de-
cade of development. The growing im-
pact of feminist scholarship, activism,
and politics will continue without our
input, but for behaviorists to remain si-
lent would mean a loss for all. Our
commonalities include historical roots,
visions of the transformative possibili-
ties of human behavior, and the com-
mitment to create optimal environ-
ments for behavioral development. A
merger is indeed in the interest of both
communities. Feminists can use our

tools to good effect, and we can integrate the feminist orientation in important areas in which effective action is sorely needed. This is a fine opportunity to forge a potentially valuable alliance, as many of our colleagues have urged us to do (Allen, Barone, & Kuhn, 1993; Foxx, 1996; Neuringer, 1991).

Forging this alliance will be a challenging task, but the products of our efforts are highly promising. The most difficult impasse will be the reconceptualization of personal agency called for by a behavioral analysis. Yet this transformative act can have liberating effects on feminist theory and practice. Specifically, the behavioral perspective shifts the focus from agency as a quality of the person to agency as a characteristic of acts. This perspective dismisses the distinction between person and situation and the conceptual traps embedded in this false dichotomy. That is, the person and the situation are no longer understood as separate or even distinct from one another, but rather as relational coparticipants in a behavioral process.

This behavioral process entails the development of what we might call agentic voice, or said in other terms, interpretive repertoires. From a feminist radical behaviorist perspective, agency is said to emerge not in opposition to cultural practices or in spite of these. Rather, agency emerges as the understanding of the very behavioral dynamics of such controlling practices. So, to speak of agency is to speak of emergent verbal process. The verbal community creates the conditions under which we learn to name and interpret our experiences, viewing and describing ourselves not as isolated and insulated loci of information choice and power but as relational and dynamic selves in process. Finally, the development and maintenance of agentic action can then be understood as a collective process that properly resides within the verbal community.

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