

## Publishing Outside the Box: Unforeseen Dividends of Talking to Strangers

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**Abstract** This article describes publishing outside behavior analysis, letters to editors, and columns, as well as communicating outside the box with editors, authors, and journalists. Publishing can occur in a wide range of journals (e.g., *Consciousness and Cognition*), in-house publications of professional associations (e.g., Association for Psychological Science's *Observer*), general science publications (e.g., *American Scientist*, *The Scientist*), publications in service to professions (e.g., *The Chronicle of Higher Education*), general interest and specialized magazines (e.g., *Atlantic Monthly*, *Skeptical Inquirer*), and newspapers (e.g., *Los Angeles Times*). Communicating with editors, authors, and journalists includes, for instance, formal correspondence with editors and personal correspondence with authors and journalists outside the box about misunderstandings, commonalities, and complementarities of their work with respect to ours. The consequences of publishing and communicating are often unforeseen and fortuitous, many of which can never occur by remaining in the box.

**Keywords** Dissemination · Journal articles · Letters to editors · Columns · Correspondence

During the first several years after I was turned onto behavior analysis, I proselytized relentlessly to anyone who would listen and to many who would not, including

my family. I sometimes behaved, I am sorry to say, arrogantly. Over the past couple of decades, I have toned down my proselytizing and channeled it into two kinds of activities: teaching and writing. Like Vyse (2013), my classroom behavior has evolved from teaching straightforward behavior analysis in my undergraduate classes to an approach that stresses logical, critical thinking, especially about nominal psychology and less than scientific approaches to behavior. I believe that if I can turn my students into critical, scientific thinkers, they will naturally find a behavior analytic point of view more appealing and satisfying than the alternatives.

I have tried to take the same tact in my writing. In addition to promoting behavioral views of traditional topics in psychology, such as language, consciousness, auditory imagining, and theory of mind, I have offered logical and scientific critiques of other approaches, including evolutionary psychology (Schlinger 1996), intelligence testing and its accompanying theories (Schlinger 2003a), deductive (vs inductive) inference in psychology (Schlinger 1998), and traditional psychology (Schlinger 2004a, 2004b). On occasion, I have published outside the relatively small box of behavior analysis—to talk to strangers, as it were—and so far, I have had some modest success. My work falls into four general categories: articles, letters to editors, columns, and correspondence with other scientists and journalists.

### Articles

Long ago, I realized that to have the greatest impact outside the field, I needed to preach less to the choir. So,

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when possible, I have tried to publish in journals or magazines that target more general audiences. Moreover, I also learned that catchy titles attract more readers than scholarly ones. But, to retain readers, we have to write scholarly enough to be taken seriously; yet, not so much that educated readers and professionals in other fields will not get the point or take us seriously. I also reasoned that I might find a more sympathetic audience among self-described skeptics. Toward that end, I submitted and ultimately published several articles in the two main skeptic publications, *Skeptic* and *The Skeptical Inquirer*. These magazines are important because, for the most part, they already preach critical, skeptical thinking. With some exceptions, though, they mainly focus their skeptical aim on fairly easy targets, such as extrasensory perception and alien abductions. They are, however, receptive to skepticism about broader issues, including those dealing with behavior.

In my first article, “How the Human Got its Spots: A Critical Analysis of the Just-So Stories of Evolutionary Psychology” (Schlinger 1996), I took on the then fashionable and trendy field of evolutionary psychology. Looking back, I now see that article as a kind of practice for later articles. Although I thought it made the points well, the article was too scholarly and dry. However, it did produce unforeseen dividends: It was reprinted in two books (Schlinger 1999, 2002a), thus reaching an even wider audience. I continued my critique of evolutionary psychology in a book review of Nigel Barber’s (2002), “*The Science of Romance: Secrets of the Sexual Brain*,” published in *The Psychological Record* (Schlinger 2004c) and reprinted in *Skeptic* (Schlinger 2005d).

After my small *Skeptic* success, I submitted an article to the *Skeptical Inquirer*. Unlike *Skeptic*, its editor sent my submission to other psychologists for review. With a few small revisions, he accepted and published it under the catchy title, “Of Planets and Cognitions: The Use of Deductive Inference in the Natural Sciences and Psychology” (Schlinger 1998). I believe that the article was appealing because it drew an analogy between cognitive and astronomical theorizing, suggesting that the former was not at all like the latter, that is, like natural science theorizing. An unforeseen dividend was that a couple of cognitive psychologists submitted a comment suggesting that I was incorrect in my assessment of cognitive psychology. I penned a reply but, unfortunately, neither was published.

My next three outside-the-box articles were published in *Skeptic*: “The Almost Blank Slate: Making a Case for Human Nurture” (Schlinger 2004d), which was a reply to Pinker’s (2002) book, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (see also my more focused reaction to Pinker’s book, Schlinger 2002b); “How the Human Got Its Mind: Debunking the Last Great Myth in Psychology” (Schlinger 2005c), a play on the title of my 1996 *Skeptic* article and Rudyard Kipling’s “just-so” stories; and “Consciousness in Nothing but a Word” (Schlinger 2008). A few words about the genesis of last article might be instructive.

In 2005, I saw that the Skeptic Society was holding a conference at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech), titled, “Brain, Mind, and Consciousness.” Most of the scheduled speakers were neuroscientists or evolutionary biologists, with one or two psychologists, but no behavior analysts. So, I contacted the Society and offered to be one of the presenters. Because I had already published well-received articles in *Skeptic* magazine, the organizers added me to the lineup. My talk was titled, “Consciousness in Nothing But a Word,” obviously a reference to Skinner’s (1945) point that the meaning of verbal behavior is found in the circumstances that set the occasion for it. That is, consciousness is not a thing or a process but a word uttered by different people under sometimes varying circumstances. My talk was the next to last talk in a daylong conference, but I was surprised at how many skeptics in the audience liked what I had to say. Afterward, several audience members e-mailed me, and we had some fruitful exchanges, another unforeseen dividend of talking to strangers. One lesson from this experience is that we need to be assertive and make forays into other areas. With rare exceptions, no one is going to knock at our door inviting us to participate in conferences or to pen articles for nonbehavioral journals.

I am not the only behavior analyst to publish in *Skeptic* or the *Skeptical Inquirer* (see, e.g., Byrne and Normand 2000; Catania 2007; Gaynor 2004; Green 1994; Normand and Dallery 2007) and, thus, encourage other behavior analysts to submit work to them because at least some of their readers are predisposed to being swayed by logical, scientific arguments about behavior. And, because the magazines have a track record of publishing articles by behavior analysts, the door is open to us to submit more articles.

Finally, I was invited to review an article submitted to the prestigious journal, *Consciousness and Cognition*.

That came about because I had befriended a psychologist in Canada, Alain Morin, via e-mail, who had a similar approach to consciousness (as inner speech; Morin 2009). He had requested me as a reviewer. Reviewers for *Consciousness and Cognition* are given the option to pen a reply to the article that they are reviewing. I saw this as another opportunity to get a behavior analytic viewpoint to an audience for whom this might be their only contact with our position. My reply, “Some Clarifications on the Role of Inner Speech in Consciousness” (Schlinger 2009a), was published in the same issue as Morin’s article. Afterward, I was invited to review another article for the journal, this one on memory, and I once again wrote a reply. Unfortunately, the article was not accepted, and so neither was my commentary.

In addition to the magazines and journals described above, I have also published articles in *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, another journal that is receptive to behavior analytic work. The first article, “Why Psychology Hasn’t Kept Its Promises” (Schlinger 2004a), provoked a reply from Lana, a well-known social psychologist who was fairly sympathetic to a behavior analytic approach. The editor asked me to reply in kind. The result, “How Psychology Can Keep Its Promises: A Response to Lana” (Schlinger 2004b), extended the discussion in what was a positive, fruitful exchange.

After teaching at the undergraduate level for many years, I have honed behavioral interpretations of numerous topics in nominal psychology that I believe are more parsimonious than traditional ones because behavioral interpretations focus on events that can be at least potentially directly observed, measured, and tested. Toward this end, I have offered behavioral views on intelligence (Schlinger 2003a), consciousness (Schlinger 2008, Schlinger 2009a, b), mind (Schlinger 2005b, c), and theory of mind (Schlinger 2009a, b). Numerous other topics in psychology deal with behavior, of course, and are ripe for behavior analytic picking. I encourage other behavior analysts to write about topics that interest them and submit their work to nonbehavioral outlets.

Let me add one more unforeseen dividend to publishing articles in nonbehavioral outlets. Nowadays, once an article is published, it is usually available on the Internet in some form, which means that the connected world has access to it. I occasionally search the Internet for my articles and have found numerous

discussions of them on blogs and other sites, which means that my message has reached a broader audience than just the subscribers to the journals and magazines.

### Letters to Editors

In addition to penning my own articles, I have consistently responded to articles by others by writing letters to editors. I have had letters published in newspapers (e.g., *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, the *Springfield Union News*) and magazines such as *The Scientist* (e.g., Schlinger, 2003b, August, 2004a), *Monitor on Psychology* (e.g., Schlinger January, 2003), *American Scientist* (Schlinger September, 2004a), *Natural History* (e.g., Schlinger, 2004e), the *APS Observer* (Schlinger October, 2005), and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (e.g., Schlinger, 2005a). Some of my letters responded to mischaracterizations of behavior analysis, while others responded to less than parsimonious descriptions or explanations of behavior. Writing letters to editors is a good way to get a brief, succinct point about behavior analysis or its mischaracterization to many intelligent readers.

If you plan to write letters, however, here are a few guidelines. First, letters must be short and to the point, the exact opposite of writing for scholarly journals and books. You can only make one or two main points. It takes a fair amount of practice to write such a letter, especially one that has the impact you want. Second, know that editors will most likely edit your letter. And third, getting letters published is on a thin variable ratio schedule of reinforcement. Nonetheless, getting letters published can provide unforeseen dividends because many people will read them, some of whom will contact you. For example, I recently published a letter in the *Los Angeles Times* in reaction to a report that criticized schools of education (Schlinger 2013). Afterward, someone contacted me about a program to help struggling seventh grade students that contains features compatible with a behavior analytic approach to education, including self-paced instruction.

### Columns

Between 2005 and 2007, I wrote a monthly column, “Behavioral Health,” for a regional magazine, *Arroyo*

*Monthly*. I chose topics that I thought would interest the readers; they covered a range of behavioral issues from infancy to old age. Some of the columns were “New Year’s Resolutions: Take the Steps to Succeed in Whatever You Resolve for 2006” (Schlinger 2005b), “Going to the Dogs: How to Get Your Dog to Stop Jumping and Barking” (Schlinger 2006b), “Language Most Foul: How to Prevent Your Child from Saying Those Bad Words” (Schlinger 2006b), “Older and Wiser: Staying Behaviorally Healthy as You Age” (Schlinger 2007a), “Excuse Me: How To Deal With Those Darn Interruptions” (Schlinger 2007b), and “Fit as a Fiddle. How to Help Your Children Get into Shape” (Schlinger 2007c). My wife was the editor of the magazine, so that did not hurt. Still, the publisher agreed to run the column. In addition, I have also written columns for Education.com, among them are “ADHD, or Just Being Kids?” (Schlinger August, 2007a) and “Writing: It Takes Practice” (Schlinger August, 2007b). If you are interested in doing something similar, contact the editor of a local newspaper or magazine and offer to write a monthly (or even weekly) advice column. You can even respond to readers’ questions. Be prepared, though, not to be paid much, if anything.

Numerous opportunities are available for behavior analysts to contribute to the discussion of behavior, both in local and regional magazines and online forums. To be successful, though, you must address topics of importance to the particular outlet and be able to offer something novel and interesting to readers. I am not a big fan of blogs because so many exist; anyone can blog nowadays. Several blogs, though, are prestigious (e. g., *Huffington Post*; *Psychology Today*) and reach large audiences, and so might be worth our consideration. Another option is to have an online magazine publish submissions. The bottom line is that, these days, publishing something on line is easier than in print.

### Correspondence with Other Scientists and Journalists

Another way to disseminate our science and view of the world is to communicate with other scientists and journalists. I cannot say that my correspondence has always been positive, but I try to be respectful and courteous. We need to offer positive, constructive feedback to authors who write either erroneously about behavior

analysis or less than parsimoniously or scientifically about behavior, especially on topics that we have tackled experimentally or through application. One thing to remember is that no scientist or journalist is too important to contact. For instance, I once wrote to the famous archeologist, Richard Leaky, about his treatment of the evolution of language in his book, *The Origin of Human Kind* (Leaky 1994), never expecting to get a response. But, to my pleasant surprise, he did respond and very courteously. I have also corresponded directly with such well-known figures as Simon Baron-Cohen, David Barash, and Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., and indirectly in print with Franz de Waal and Stephen Pinker, among others. In addition, I have communicated with science writers, including Sharon Begly, John Horgan, Matt Ridley, Jonathan Weiner, and Larissa MacFarquhar, and with the editors of *Scientific American*, John Rennie and George Musser. I believe that if scientists and journalists who write about behavior hear from reasonable behavior analysts, especially ones at academic institutions, then at least, they know we exist and can offer an alternative and scientific approach to the standard ones.

### Conclusion

I tell my students “the rat is always right.” In this case, the rat includes other psychologists, scientists, and journalists, whose reinforcement histories are responsible for what they write. Although we cannot change their histories, we can set the occasion for new and different ways of thinking about behavior. But, we cannot have these effects and unforeseen fortuitous dividends if we do not venture outside our box to talk to them.

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