

## Opening Skinner's Box: an Introduction

Matthew P. Normand

Published online: 2 August 2014

© Association for Behavior Analysis International 2014

**Abstract** Behavior analysts have redefined the subject matter of psychology, redesigned the experiments used to study that subject matter, renamed almost every part of the world pertaining to that subject matter, and created specialized organizations and journals. It is not surprising, then, that only a happy few ever hear what behavior analysts say. One problem is that we need to publish outside of the box, so to speak. Preaching to the choir ensures that the products of our scientific behavior affect only a few people, limits the variety of reinforcers we are likely to encounter, and limits the likelihood that the products of our scientific behavior will reinforce the behavior of others. Publishing in a wider variety of outlets can lead to greater visibility for behavior-analytic research and practice, increase the impact of our published work, and build clout for scholars in colleges and universities.

**Keywords** Dissemination · Impact factor · Publication · Selection by consequences

We few, we happy few. For almost as long as the field of behavior analysis has existed, we have played in our own sandbox. We redefined the subject matter of psychology and redesigned the experiments used to study that subject matter. We renamed almost every part of the

world pertaining to that subject matter. We created our own organizations and our own journals. To use Skinner's own words, "Rather than break out of the ghetto," we chose to "strengthen its walls" (Skinner 1993, p. 5). It is not surprising that only the few hear what we say.

Although we have always been a happy few, we have not always been so quiet. Before the Association for Behavior Analysis (now International), before the *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior (JEAB)*, even before Division 25 for Behavior Analysis of the American Psychological Association, behaviorists had to compete in the larger arena of psychology and the related sciences. There was no such thing as publishing outside of the box—there was no box. To get published or presented, you had to mix it up with everybody else. This was, I think, a powerful form of selection by consequences. The fittest survived and propagated, often on the pages of major journals (e.g., *Science*, *American Psychologist*) and in prestigious institutions (e.g., Harvard, Columbia). It is worth noting that Skinner presented his formal analysis of operant conditioning in terms of "selection by consequences" not in *JEAB* or *The Behavior Analyst*, but in *Science* (Skinner 1981). To succeed, you had to be as good as the rest, if not better. It also meant that not all of the good made it to the public arena. This was not an ideal situation, to be sure, and it ultimately led to the building of our ghetto. Looking back, however, it seems that in building it, we forgot to install a door to the outside.

Many of the earliest behavior analysts, and here I use the term to denote active researchers in the pre-*JEAB*

---

M. P. Normand (✉)  
Department of Psychology, University of the Pacific,  
3601 Pacific Avenue, Stockton, CA 95211, USA  
e-mail: mnormand@pacific.edu

era, compiled resumes that compare favorably with the most accomplished scientists at the most prestigious institutions. Publications in *Science* and *Nature*, to say nothing of so-called “mainstream” experimental psychology journals, were common. Some of the earliest “behavior modification” applications were published in mainstream clinical psychology journals. The research was good enough to pass muster in a world of nonbehaviorists, even if much of that research was not favored in that world. There was a time when it took at least some effort to avoid reading behavior-analytic research on the pages of scientific journals. It is much easier to avoid it today, as you need only to avoid a handful of low impact-factor journals. There are exceptions, of course, but these prove the rule. I contend that this early “survival of the fittest” environment shaped different scholarly repertoires than our field typically shapes today. In some ways, it is easier to build the walls of the ghetto than to break them down.

Preaching to the choir, as it were, is not all bad. It does, however, have some negative consequences. For one, the products of our scientific behavior affect only a few people. Granted, the people affected are probably those most likely to respond effectively to what we produce. However, this limits the variety of reinforcers we are likely to encounter for our own scientific behavior and limits the likelihood that the products of our behavior will reinforce the behavior of others. Publishing “by us for us” also inevitably reduces the impact of our publications. It cuts both ways, of course. In the same way that many behavior analysts publish inside of our box, as many probably read within that same box. Like preaching, listening to the choir is not all bad, either. However, it does have some negative consequences. For one, it makes us hypocrites. We are incensed that so many outside of behavior analysts do not know about, let alone appreciate, the many wonderful things we have discovered and all that we can do. Arguably, however, few of us know much about the various things (wonderful or not) that others have discovered and some of what those others can do (e.g., influence public policy). For another, it makes publishing outside of the box more difficult insofar as we are unlikely to be able to place our work in a context that is meaningful for a wider audience.

In any event, preaching to the choir leads to low-impact factors for our scholarly journals. A reliance on

self-citations in published papers (i.e., citations to other papers published in the same journal) is a variable that directly reduces a journal’s impact factor. Why is this important? Well, for all of the shortcomings of the impact factor as a measure of scientific behavior, it is used by many as a means of evaluating the worth of individual scholars and even entire fields of study. Decisions about promotion and tenure at colleges and universities often depend on the perceived quality and impact of a scholar’s work. The impact factor can and does influence this perception. Publishing in high-impact journals also is important if we want our work to be selected by the consequences mediated by powerful selecting agents. That is, our work needs to be in the right environments (e.g., journals, institutions) to encounter the most powerful selecting agents (e.g., institutions, public, policy). We need to open our box.

Publishing in a wider variety of outlets can only lead to greater visibility for behavior analytic research and practice, increase the impact of our published work, and build clout for scholars in colleges, universities, and other institutions. So how do we do this? I am reminded of Skinner’s (1956) description of the scientific method using a case history rather than a cookie-cutter-how-to guide. Just as there is no cookbook or road map for conducting good research, no easy guide exists for publishing in more mainstream outlets. Instead, the following papers offer case studies of how to break out of our ghetto or, at the very least, to publish outside of our box. Each paper in this special section grew out of panel discussion comments by among Stuart Vyse, Pat Friman, Hank Schlinger, and Derek Reed at the 2014 meeting of the Association for Behavior Analysis International in Minneapolis, MN. I chaired the panel at Ed Morris’s invitation. He was the panel’s organizer but did not participate in it. I now happily provide the opportunity for readers to bask in the reflections of the four panelists. Appropriately, Ed Morris gets the last word.

## References

- Skinner, B. F. (1956). Case history in scientific method. *American Psychologist*, *11*, 221–233.
- Skinner, B. F. (1981). Selection by consequences. *Science*, *213*, 501–504.
- Skinner, B. F. (1993). A world of our own. *Behaviorology*, *1*, 3–5.