



Beyond a Call to Action: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Diversity and Equity in the Practice of Behavior Analysis

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Abstract

In this editorial, we provide commentary on the state of diversity and equity in the practice of behavior analysis. We describe themes from this special issue and call upon members of the field of applied behavior analysis to live a values-driven life that involves the systematic and data-driven practice of diversity and equity each and every day.

Keywords Applied behavior analysis · Diversity · Equity · Special issue

When we look at modern man, we have to face the fact: that modern man suffers from a kind of poverty of the spirit, which stands in glaring contrast to his scientific and technological abundance. We've learned to fly the air like birds, we've learned to swim the seas like fish. And yet we haven't learned to walk the Earth as brothers and sisters.

—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

As a field we have lost sight of the importance and study of the social context in which human behavior occurs. Though we continue to be successful in the administration of behavioral principles in producing effective behavior change with a wide range of topographies and populations, we have continued to focus on molecular problems. These problems, when “solved,” do not demonstrate a complete application of behavioral technology. These solutions are fragmentary at best and are destined for failure without equal care and understanding of the cultural variables that affect the behavior, the third level of selection (Skinner, 1981), and that are the essence and the lifeblood of the human condition. Unfortunately, we have

drifted far from our past calls for “social validity” (Schwartz & Baer, 1991; Wolf, 1978). Recent cultural movements, including MeToo and Black Lives Matter, have awoken our broader culture to the importance of these issues, and the discipline of behavior analysis has broadly acknowledged that it is time for us to catch up.

To quote Shahla Ala'i's keynote address at the 2019 Women in Behavior Analysis Conference, as behavior analysts, we are often “culturally blind” when developing and applying interventions. We have inappropriately assumed that what works for some should work for all, regardless of the context. As a field, many of us have inappropriately assumed that gender and racial inequality, economic poverty, distrust in law enforcement, citizenship status, political affiliation, beliefs in Western medicine, and so on do not factor into the behavior-change equation. These assumptions are naive and incomplete at best and harmful at worst. These assumptions go against the idea that we must take into account the context in which behavior occurs and is supported (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968), but they also challenge our field's stated commitment to socially valid intervention goals, procedures, and results.

An analysis of how we have drifted away from or simply ignored such significant and important matters is well beyond the scope of this editorial or any special issue. However, it is a problem that we must acknowledge, discuss, and act upon. Although we cannot change the past, we must acknowledge our many mistakes, work every day to learn from them, and then do significantly better than the generations before us. We must go beyond a “call to action” and finally put our technology to use.

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Beyond a Call to Action

In this special issue, you will find several ideas for actionable steps that you can take, whatever your role, to better your practice as a behavior analyst. We made a concerted effort to empower authors who submitted papers for consideration to go beyond a call to action so that readers might have ideas for how they can change their own approach, whether it be in the university classroom, school, or clinic. A description of a problem, and a call that we should do something about it, can be helpful in bringing to light matters of concern. What we need, however, are actionable solutions. Therefore, we looked for and ultimately included papers that presented concrete ideas for moving our field forward.

Still, a description of actionable steps will likely not be enough. Once we put our culturally responsive processes into action, we need to start collecting data on the outcomes these processes produce. We have a few examples of empirical research in this special issue, and additional papers will emerge in ongoing special sections on diversity and equity in *Behavior Analysis in Practice* over the next year. But to date, we are limited in the number of studies that report outcomes that embrace a culturally responsive, equitable, and inclusive perspective and take seriously the role of the third level of selection. Problems of inequity, bias, and injustice are, of course, problems of human behavior. Of all the sciences in the world, the science of behavior analysis is perhaps the best suited to design and test intervention programs that actually produce *socially significant* behavior change that disrupts, lessens, and ultimately prevents inequity, and is also measurable. Put more simply, we need more data to support this movement by showing what works to actually change behavior, not merely talk about the need for society to change its behavior. We owe it to our consumers, we owe it to each other, and we owe it to the generations who come after us to provide them with empirical solutions and frameworks for the problems they will undoubtedly face in an increasingly troubling and complex world.

Policy Changes and Values-Driven Processes

Many themes will emerge from the papers in this special issue, and we would like to end with a brief discussion of two of them. The first theme is that policy makers are in a position to make rapid change. As a field, we are far behind other fields (e.g., psychology, social work) in terms of teaching and training on matters of diversity and equity. For example, licensed psychologists are required to get continuing education hours on cultural competence and diversity. Educational, school psychology, and clinical psychology graduate and training programs are expected to provide students, interns, and post-doctoral fellows with training in diversity and cultural

competence, ethics, and empirically supported research. The Behavior Analyst Certification Board and the Association for Behavior Analysis International are two institutions that can enact policy changes that are likely to make an enormous difference not only in practice but also in research and training. We encourage leaders in our field to carefully read the papers in this special issue. The voices of the authors are to be heard and taken seriously. And though they represent a variety of opinions and perspectives, one thing is clear: The ball is in your court.

The second theme, and the theme we believe to be the most important, is that continuous improvement and action with regard to diversity and equity is a process; it is not an outcome. Diversity and equity are not just about filling a quota of racially diverse employees. Diversity and equity are not just about equal pay for employees, regardless of their gender. Instead, diversity and equity are about adopting and practicing a mind-set, a values-driven and data-guided process to employ and improve upon each and every day. The papers in this special issue describe examples of the response class of the diverse and equitable practice in behavior analysis, but they are not exhaustive, nor are the actionable steps they describe an end point. They are only the beginning of ensuring our technological abundance elevates and improves the human condition not for some but for all.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author.

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