



Black Women and Barriers to Leadership in ABA

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Abstract

In recent years, anecdotal data have suggested an increase in the number of Black women in the field of applied behavior analysis (ABA). However, there does not appear to be a significant increase in the number of Black women in leadership roles within the field (e.g., clinical directors, heads of university and college ABA programs). Since the diversity of providers and leadership in the field is an important factor in effectively meeting the diverse needs of ABA consumers, the lack of Black women leaders in the field can be described as problematic. Identification of the potential barriers some Black women face when pursuing and attaining positions of leadership in the field of ABA, such as a lack of diversity, stereotypes, and insufficient access to mentors and sponsors, may serve as an effective first step to ameliorating the problem. Recommendations to address identified barriers, including a conceptually systemic plan for data collection that includes racial and gender data, paired with the use of reflective practice by ABA practitioners, and additional diversity and inclusion research in the area of organizational behavior management. Recommendations are offered.

Keywords ABA · BCBA · Black women · Diversity · Inclusion · Leadership

In recent years, it appears there has been an increase in the number of Black women credentialed and serving as Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) within the field of applied behavior analysis (ABA). The evidence to support this claim is, unfortunately, anecdotal at best, as these important demographic data are not currently being tracked and reported by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB).

As of November 2018, I see and interface with more Black women BCBAs than I ever have in my career, which spans more than two decades. I see increased numbers of Black women employed as behavior analysts, holding memberships in ABA professional organizations, and presenting at national conferences. What I do not see, however, is a visible increase in the numbers of Black women heading professional organizations and holding positions as university department heads for ABA programs or as senior directors of clinical services. In short, anecdotal evidence suggests Black women within the field of ABA are not assuming leadership roles at high and visible rates. After more than three decades of interventions, people of color are still progressing to leadership at a

disproportionately lower rate than their White counterparts in the professional labor force (Makino & Oliver, 2019). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Black women have the least statistical parity in leadership positions across the labor force, meaning their representation at the leadership level is not equal to that of the wider population (Makino & Oliver, 2019). Identifying barriers to Black women assuming leadership roles in the field of ABA is a timely and pressing issue. Valuing diversity and inclusion in leadership within the field of ABA is likely to lead to more positive outcomes for those we serve with our science. The positive evolution of the field of ABA requires that barriers to Black women assuming leadership roles be identified and effectively addressed.

Over a period of 1 year, I met with five Black women, all BCBAs who are actively working within the field of ABA. I identify these women by numbers (e.g., BCBA1) for two reasons. The most obvious reason to identify these Black women as BCBA# is for the sake of confidentiality. This decision may seem less personal than the traditional use of pseudonyms. However, the second reason for adopting this identification system is to remind the reader that each of these Black women has already achieved certification as a BCBA, which, unfortunately, is all too often overlooked in the workplace.

These women openly and honestly shared their work experiences, thoughts on moving into leadership roles, and specific barriers they have faced and/or anticipate facing if they

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choose to pursue a leadership position within the field. Some may question the value of discussing anticipated barriers; however, anticipated barriers are the result of our reinforcement histories. These challenges and anticipated barriers are relevant because they reflect how the experiences of these Black women behavior analysts can reasonably predict the types of barriers other Black women may experience. Just as baseline data help us predict a client's behavior if intervention is not implemented, the identification of environmental conditions that serve as barriers to Black women effectively performing their jobs in a positive work environment that is conducive to leadership opportunities can be arguably predictive of the barriers other Black women face. These conversations with my colleagues were both welcomed and exciting experiences and will be shared throughout the article.

The “Only One”

Certainly, Black women within the field of ABA are not a monolithic group. Like all behavior analysts, they arrive to the field from a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, and professional interests. However, one common denominator for many Black women within the field of ABA is that at some point in their careers, they are likely to be in the unique position of being the *only* Black woman ABA professional at the school, clinic, agency, or program where they are employed. Being the “only one” of any group in the workplace may serve as an incredible disadvantage, specifically as it relates to pursuing and attaining positions of leadership. According to a recent report published by the American Association of University Women, “the lives of many Black women outside of work are less likely to overlap with those of influential managers, who tend to be White” (Hill, Miller, Benson, & Handley, 2016, p. 20). Black women may be less likely to live in the same neighborhoods, send their children to the same schools, and participate in the same community organizations as those in power in the workplace. There is less social connectedness across racial lines, which may create conditions that require more effort to network (Hill et al., 2016).

As the only Black woman, or one of two or three other Black women in a work environment, Black women often report feelings of isolation and invisibility at work (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015). BCBA1 has worked in the field for 9 years and has been a BCBA for 5 years. BCBA1 shared that she felt one of the most significant barriers she has faced as a Black woman who seeks to attain a leadership position within the field of ABA was that “the voices of Black women in the field are unheard and as a group, Black women are professionally invisible” (BCBA1, personal communication, November 21, 2018). BCBA1 shared an experience she routinely has during team meetings with other BCBA's. On several occasions when she was in the process of

explaining something or answering a question, a colleague would interrupt her and say, “I think what BCBA1 is trying to say is . . .” BCBA1 reported that this behavior typically happened only to her and served to create such aversive conditions during staff meetings that she began to stay quiet during meetings to avoid being interrupted and talked over by her colleague.

Black women professionals working within the field of ABA in environmental conditions that render them the “only one” may experience a heightened sense of scrutiny of their work behaviors, creating a paradox of invisibility and hypervisibility. This paradox may also manifest as subtle spoken and unspoken behaviors defined as microaggressions. Chancellor defines *microaggressions* as subtle, unconscious, layered, spoken and unspoken insults directed at people based on race and other distinguishing characteristics (Chancellor, 2019). BCBA2, who has been certified for 4 years, described the very routine experience of being mistaken for an associate-level provider. Despite being and looking 32 years of age when she would arrive to supervise a direct report, she would often be asked, “Are you a BCBA?” She also reported being asked a litany of questions about her programming and clinical judgments to which her White counterparts are not being observably subjected. This “verification” process occurs at multiple levels. BCBA2 described meeting her clients for the first time; she regularly must endure a vetting process to prove herself (BCBA2, personal communication, November 23, 2019). In time, and after developing rapport and a substantial learning history, her clients come to regard her as a competent and skilled clinician, but the processes to get to that point are labor intensive and above and beyond what she sees her White counterparts experience in the field. “For others competence is assumed but I have to prove my competence and it's exhausting” (BCBA2, personal communication, November 23, 2019). BCBA2 reported that she has endured these experiences for 4 years and described them as being a “slow drip” to burnout. When she shared her experience with her supervisor, she was told that what she was experiencing was a normal part of work as a BCBA and that most clinicians go through this process. In BCBA2's words, “my supervisor was dismissive of my experience.” BCBA2 reported being tired and feeling anxious all the time since becoming a BCBA. She said she did not know if she could continue as a BCBA, let alone pursue a leadership role within the field, because she just did not have the energy to continue to endure these seemingly constant battles (BCBA2, personal communication, November 23, 2019).

Being subjected to microaggressions over a period of time can result in *racial battle fatigue*, a term originally conceptualized by William A. Smith to describe the social, physiological, and psychological stress responses experienced by Black males on historically White college campuses (Chancellor, 2019). Working under conditions eliciting racial battle fatigue

can serve as a barrier to Black women pursuing leadership positions because the response effort required to determine if they should confront or ignore these aversive conditions means they have less energy or time to actively engage in behaviors that likely lead to promotion (e.g., describing all of their successful problem-solving efforts to their supervisor).

Some may argue that Black women are not pursuing presented and available leadership opportunities within the field of ABA, but that point of view may be overly selective. Black women may be reluctant to pursue leadership roles in organizations that do not have a demonstrated history of hiring and effectively supporting Black women. Thus, they may not pursue opportunities and instead seek to avoid the aversive conditions that set the occasion for racial battle fatigue. In the past year, BCBA3, who has more than a decade of experience, chose not to apply for a leadership position that became available earlier in the year, stating, “I knew if I applied and got the position, I would not be effectively supported as a leader.” She further explained, “I have experienced too many instances of microaggressions and instances of not being supported in my current role and can only imagine what it will be like in a leadership position” (BCBA3, personal communication, November 23, 2019). Black women who have historically experienced regular (e.g., daily) microaggressions alongside greater work demands when they have achieved important professional accomplishments (e.g., becoming a BCBA), may fear that assuming leadership positions will yield a similar or greater risk.

Combating Stereotypes and Implicit Bias

Negative stereotypes and implicit bias may also serve as barriers to Black women securing leadership roles within ABA. According to Jones and Norwood (2017), “Black women’s histories and contemporary experiences differ from those of White women and Black men . . . These differing histories, shaped by the intersection of race and gender, inform the biases and stereotypes to which Black women are subject” (p. 2045). *Stereotypes* are defined as cognitive categorizations that are not necessarily the result of blatant or overt prejudice and that are consciously or unconsciously applied to individuals. Stereotypes affect how we perceive others and can influence how we interact with them (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008). Stereotypes can serve as foundational building blocks of *beliefs*, which refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner (The Kirwan Institute, 2015). Because implicit biases driven by stereotypes are often unconscious, it is difficult to self-identify them even when you make a deliberative and concerted effort to do so. What does the term *unconscious* mean from a behavior-analytic perspective?

Implicit bias may result from the myriad messages and images conveying stereotypes about others and ourselves that we are exposed to in our technologically and image-focused environment. When inundated with television shows and movies depicting people of color as criminals, women as weaker than men, and other stereotypes, our verbal behavior is shaped by observational learning that inaccurately depicts individuals and groups with whom we come in contact. With repeated daily exposure across decades, we take actions based on a flawed observational learning history. (S. M. Wilczynski, personal communication, November 26, 2019)

For some Black women, combating racial stereotypes has become an unfortunate part of their everyday work lives and has the potential to shape their work behaviors. One common stereotype is that Black women are hostile and aggressive, commonly referred to as the “angry Black woman.” As a result of the angry Black woman stereotype, some Black women remain quiet or are less vocal even in situations and circumstances that call for them to speak up. Reflecting on the earlier example shared by BCBA1, when she chose to remain quiet after a colleague routinely interrupted and spoke over or “for” her, she explained, “I believed if I publicly called him out on his behavior I would risk being labeled as hostile and aggressive.” This concern was not unfounded. She further explained, “In the past, Black women that have been vocal in disagreeing with others had been immediately labeled as a problem, which eventually led to them quitting or being terminated” (BCBA1, personal communication, November 23, 2019). Black women may fear retaliation if they are perceived as being too vocal or contrary. These conditions have the potential to silence the opinions and perspectives of Black women within the field, creating an additional barrier to Black women assuming leadership within the field. Jones and Norwood (2017) suggested Black women are constantly faced with decisional moments—fleeting instances in which they must decide whether to speak or be silent. When Black women find themselves in situations where they must become soft-spoken or silenced in an effort to reduce the chance of people viewing them as threatening or confrontational, they may be disadvantaged as to how people view them as leaders (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008).

Another stereotype is that Black women are less qualified and less competent. BCBA4, a Black woman working in the field for 7 years, said she believed one of the most significant barriers she has faced as a Black woman who desires to attain a leadership role within the field of ABA is others making the assumption that she does not know what she is doing or talking about as a practitioner (BCBA4, personal communication, November 21, 2018). She recalled one incident at an individualized educational planning meeting for a

client, where an administrator persistently disagreed with her regarding an intervention strategy she proposed until a White BCBA shared the same information. Unfortunately, BCBA4 reported that this happens routinely (BCBA4, personal communication, November 21, 2018).

It is not uncommon for these Black women to report working longer hours, taking additional assignments, and assuming additional training and degrees to combat the perception that they are less qualified. Countless Black women have been told by loved ones, mentors, and colleagues, “You will have to work twice as hard to get half as much,” or “You have to be twice as good to get noticed for the work you do and three times as good to get ahead.” Sadly, these words may prove to be true given the fact that Black women continue to be grossly underrepresented in positions of leadership within the field of ABA.

Supervision, Mentorship, and Sponsorship

The aforementioned contingencies resulting from workplace isolation and stereotypes create barriers that may significantly impact a Black woman’s ability to contact effective supervision, mentorship, and sponsorship, three key foundational components needed for pursuing and assuming leadership roles within the field of ABA. As outlined by the criteria established by the BACB, effective supervision facilitates the development of future behavior analysts who are competent, confident, and effective practitioners (Sellers, Valentino, & LeBlanc, 2016). It is also the first step for any ABA practitioner who wishes to pursue and assume a position of leadership within the field. However, appropriate conditions must be set for supervision to be effective. First, supervisees must be willing and able to be professionally vulnerable with their supervisors, by disclosing what they do not know and asking for help when they anticipate or need it (Fries-Britt & Snider, 2015). If supervisees fear they will be perceived as less qualified or incompetent, they may not readily, proactively, and preventively seek out their supervisors for guidance, which is critical to the success of their clients and their development as effective and competent practitioners of ABA. Supervisors, when they understand that previously encountering stereotypes and microaggressions may limit how often supervisees solicit support, will want to seek opportunities to acknowledge the accomplishments of Black women behavior analysts. In addition, because supervisors may be unaware that they engage in verbal behavior that reduces the likelihood their Black woman supervisees will request support, they should consider specifically asking if there is anything they can say or do differently to be more supportive of their Black woman supervisees. By being open to feedback from their Black woman supervisees, they model a behavior they should hope

all supervisees will emulate, and they are likely to learn how to be more effective supervisors in the process.

Mentorship and sponsorship are two additional key foundational components needed for Black women to successfully pursue and assume positions of leadership within the field. These two terms are often used interchangeably; however, they are in fact different (Helms, Arfken, & Bellar, 2016). *Mentorship* is a semistructured system of guidance whereby one person shares his or her knowledge, skills, and experience to assist another’s career progression. Mentorship can be provided by a boss, peer, or any party willing to share knowledge and information. Mentors are valuable and essential to professional growth. Many ABA professionals have multiple mentors over the duration of their careers (Helms et al., 2016).

Sponsorship, unlike mentorship, can provide a more direct line to leadership within the field of ABA. *Sponsorships* are reciprocal professional relationships that develop over time. By the time sponsorship opportunities are presented to a practitioner, the ABA professional should have developed a successful body of work and skills from which the sponsor can benefit. Sponsors not only give advice but also are able to help those they sponsor advance their careers and can groom them for leadership positions. Those best able to provide sponsorship within the field of ABA include those who hold leadership positions as heads of professional organizations, department heads of college and university ABA programs, and senior directors of clinical services (Helms et al., 2016).

Strong mentorship and sponsorship relationships are professional relationships that are built over time and often outside of traditional work hours. The professional isolation experienced by too many Black women likely serves as a significant barrier to building relationships with mentors that lead to access to sponsors. Securing meaningful and effective sponsorship appears to be a significant barrier to Black women pursuing and assuming positions of leadership within the field of ABA. Without sponsorship from reputable and established professionals within the field, skilled and competent Black women ABA professionals may not have the support and access they need to move into positions of leadership.

Data Collection of Demographics of Racial Identity

In the past 20 years, the field of ABA has experienced some growth in the number of Black women practitioners. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that Black women holding leadership positions within the field remain grossly underrepresented. Currently, demographic data of BCBA4s that include racial and gender identity are not collected and reported by the BACB. These demographic data may hold the key to identifying the barriers that contribute to the

underrepresentation of Black women in leadership roles in the field of ABA.

It is not uncommon for the general public to attempt to address complex issues around diversity and inclusion largely based on thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. As trained practitioners in the science of ABA, we must attempt to answer questions and solve problems related to diversity and inclusion by using a conceptually systemic plan for the collection and analysis of demographic data of BCBAAs that include race and gender.

Given the lack of direct evidence about the representation of Black women in leadership roles in ABA organizations, I conducted an informal “diversity analysis” of programs from recent annual conventions of the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI) to see if people of color were well represented. I do not describe this as a “study” because my goal was to simply observe and compare against my expectations. I examined the B. F. Skinner Lecture Series between the years 2017 and 2019, which includes invited speakers regarded as leading contributors within the field of ABA from around the world. There were a total of 52 invited B. F. Skinner Lecture Series speakers at the ABAI convention between the years 2017 and 2019 (ABAI, 2017, 2018, 2019). I fully acknowledge the methodological limitations of examining speaker photos for physical characteristics often associated with a particular racial group (e.g., the apparent color of skin, the texture of hair), so I encourage readers to examine program manuals from conventions they have attended to conduct their own informal “diversity analyses” to see if their observations match the outcomes described here. Of the 52 invited speakers, 92% were White (67% were White males, 27% were White females), less than 1% were Asian females, and less than 1% were Latino females. There were no Black male or female invited speakers as part of the ABAI’s annual national convention’s B. F. Skinner Lecture Series between 2017 and 2019. Despite this methodological weakness, these observations indicate it is likely that hundreds if not thousands of professionals in the ABA field do not come into contact with professionals of color, particularly Black women, as leaders in the field.

Diversity in leadership can help to ensure that the multiple voices and perspectives represented in our field are heard and shared. According to Makino and Oliver (2019), strengthening diverse voices to leadership levels not only improves organizational performance but also reinforces an inclusive national narrative that normalizes perceptions of high competency and efficacy of groups currently devalued in American society (Makino & Oliver, 2019). Something every reader can do to address this concern is to request more diverse representation in high-profile speaker positions at state, regional, and national conferences.

Reflective Practice in the Field of Applied Behavior Analysis

Our leading ABA organizations (the ABAI, the Association for Professional Behavior Analysis, the BACB) should begin collecting data on race and ethnicity, and these data should be made publicly available. Leaders in these organizations can also use these data to ensure they are actively recruiting Black women and other underrepresented groups into leadership positions. Data collection is a good start, but data collection alone is insufficient to effectively address the conditions that result in barriers to Black women assuming leadership roles. Even with the most robust analyses in hand and information technology systems in place, translating data into useable information and then actionable knowledge is a difficult proposition (Hora & Smolarek, 2018). Collection and analysis of data can be paired with a professional practice tool known as *reflective practice*, defined as reflection upon one’s personal beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, as well as the knowledge of how these beliefs and practices affect others (Shea, Goldberg, & Weatherston, 2016). We as practitioners in the field of ABA may use reflective practice as a tool to examine our own behaviors and implicit biases relating to diversity and barriers to inclusion.

As behavior analysts, we spend a great deal of time addressing the socially significant behaviors of those we serve. As we approach this crossroads in our evolution as a science, we must engage in deep reflection about the core values we hold as a field. It is time to reflect on our own practices within the field of ABA and use the science to move our field forward with diverse and inclusive leadership. Additional research in the realm of organizational behavior management (OBM) that addresses issues of diversity and inclusion is needed to bring these issues to the forefront of the science of behavior.

Conclusion

The field of ABA is young, and it has been exciting to watch the field grow and evolve over the past 20-plus years of my career. There appears to be an increased number of diverse practitioners credentialed as BCBAAs. I have personally seen more Black women than ever enter the field. However, I do not see a visible increase in the number of Black women in leadership roles in the field. Black women bring knowledge, experiences, and perspectives to the field that need to be represented at all levels, to ensure that we are fully representing those who consume ABA services. A conceptually systemic plan for data collection that includes racial and gender data, paired with reflective practice, can be used as a starting point in identifying individual and systemic trends and barriers that prevent Black women from assuming leadership roles. Additional research in the area of OBM can serve as a powerful agent of change around topics related to inclusion and diversity. For example, OBM researchers could collect and

analyze data on employment trends with Black women in the field of ABA in order to more closely identify barriers to leadership and problem-solve for solutions. We, as behavior analysts, are equipped with the knowledge of an amazing and effective science. We are in the unique position to lead conversations and help guide socially significant changes through the lens and understanding of ABA. However, our efforts must be inclusive and the voices of all our colleagues must be shared and, more importantly, heard and included as we move our field forward successfully, effectively, and in a way that best supports all of our clients and members. Black women appear not to be advancing to the ranks of leadership within the field of ABA. This is concerning because Black women bring many leadership strengths to the field, often including values of teamwork, resourcefulness, and fairness. The field of ABA may not fully benefit from the talent and skills these women bring to the table if barriers to leadership for Black women are not addressed and removed. The field of ABA is ever changing, and we, too, must evolve if we seek to give serious consideration to the “applied” dimension of ABA (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968), which requires that we address behaviors that are relevant to society. Our field has come a long way in a short period of time, and although the discussion in this article does not offer quick solutions, the recommendations presented will hopefully take the field a step further. This article is intended to provide insight that would allow for the evolution of the field by providing practical steps to meaningfully support Black women so they can become strong leaders within the field of ABA without facing undue societal barriers.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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