Actively Caring for People: Humanistic Behaviorism in Practice

Derek D. Reed

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In mid-April, 2007, the campus of Virginia Tech experienced the worst college shooting massacre in history. In the aftermath, it was discovered that the shooter left a manifesto detailing a history of severe bullying that exacerbated existing mental health conditions. From this tragedy, however, rose a movement of compassion deeply rooted in behavioral science—Actively Caring for People.

Virginia Tech is home to Dr. E. Scott Geller, a name well known to the readers of *Behavior Analysis in Practice* due to Dr. Geller's seminal work in performance management, behavior-based safety, and behavioral community interventions. Beyond his truly stunning academic history, Dr. Geller exhibits an infectious enthusiasm for Skinner's *humanistic behaviorism*. Anyone who has been so lucky to attend one of Dr. Geller's presentations can attest to how life changing his message can be. My outlook on behavior analysis was forever changed by Dr. Geller when I was introduced to his Actively Caring for People (AC4P) approach in his ABAI Behavior Change for a Sustainable World invited address in 2012. I am now part of the AC4P Movement.

Dr. Geller began using the term “actively caring” in 1991 as a way to promote applied behavioral science in organizational settings (Geller 1991). A historical perspective is necessary to understand the firm behavioral foundations of the model. Dr. Geller sought a way to convince industry to adopt behavior analytic techniques. He knew that dropping phrases like “three-term contingency” would not spark interest in laypersons. However, organizational decision makers could support actively caring. *Actively* caring implies action and behavior

that need to be carefully observed and recorded. *Actively caring* suggests antecedent and consequence control of behavior to promote desirable outcomes. *Actively caring* is thus a synonym—albeit, a layperson friendly one—for applied behavioral science. Since 1991, Dr. Geller and his colleagues have busily applied the Actively Caring model to issues such as occupational safety (Roberts and Geller 1996), sustainability (see Geller 1995), and organizational behavior management (e.g., Wiegand and Geller 2004). The tragic Virginia Tech shooting was the impetus for Dr. Geller's full-frontal application of Actively Caring to *people*, in general. In sum, Dr. Geller took Actively Caring to the cultural scale.

The Actively Caring for People movement (or AC4P; Geller 2014a, b) is a special form of applied behavioral science. According to Dr. Geller, “Behavioral science has the evidenced-based technology to improve behavior, but the method of delivery is critical, especially for long-term impact. This requires empathic customization, and this is the domain of humanism.” The AC4P model is simple. (1) You observe an act of kindness (someone demonstrating caring for another person or for the environment) when going about your daily routine. (2) You personally thank the individual for caring to reward this response. (3) You then give the person a special green AC4P wristband (see Fig. 1; also visit www.ac4p.org) and ask the individual to pass it on when s/he sees someone else engaged in AC4P behavior. (4) You ask the person to share the story of this exchange on social media and tag the event with the code imprinted on the wristband. Through this process, cultural awareness of caring is fostered. Dr. Geller and his team (Fig. 2) have formalized the AC4P Movement in elementary, middle, and high schools to establish more empathic cultures where interpersonal conflicts and bullying are reduced while AC4P behaviors are promoted. In doing so, tragic outcomes from bullied students have been prevented.

D. D. Reed (✉)

Department of Applied Behavioral Science 4048 Dole Human
Development Center, University of Kansas, 1000 Sunnyside Avenue,
Lawrence, KS 66045, USA
e-mail: dreed@ku.edu

Fig. 1 AC4P wristbands

For the sake of this Field Report, I asked Dr. Geller how interested readers could start an AC4P Movement in their own settings. His response accentuates the compassionate and interdependent culture he aims to promote:

Let's be ONE AC4P Movement, not separate silos of individual AC4P efforts. We have two edited books [Geller 2014a, b] to teach AC4P principles and practical applications, and a website (www.ac4p.org) to share

success stories and distribute AC4P wristbands. The website needs improvement and the books will be continuously improved as more folks contribute chapters and AC4P stories. Let's build on this foundation with continuous improvement and evolution through research and relevant real-world experiences.

In sum, applied behavior analysis has learned much from Dr. Geller's scholarship throughout its history. It's time applied behavior analysts realize the potential of the AC4P approach in addressing large-scale change. At the local level, readers of *Behavior Analysis in Practice* are invited to join the movement by adapting AC4P in their settings, whether it's early childhood intervention, special needs schools, behavioral clinics, or elsewhere. Being part of this movement suggests that you are part of something special...a network of humanistic behaviorists literally hoping to change the world. You are invited to formally align with the movement by visiting www.ac4p.org/joinAC4P, and check out Dr. Geller's TedX talk on "Self- Motivation" at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sxpKhIbr0E>.

Fig. 2 Dr. E. Scott Geller and students

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