The Divergent Paths of Behavior Analysis and Psychology: *Vive la Différence!*

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Abstract Twenty years ago I suggested that behavior analysts could effect a quiet and covert takeover of the American Psychological Association (APA). I gave as precedents the operation of similar initiatives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Darwinian-inspired X-Club, and the psychoanalytically-oriented Secret Ring. Though a conscientious program of working within established APA bylaws and rules, behavior analysts could ensure that behavior analysts were nominated for every significant elective position within the APA, and move to get their colleagues placed in appointive positions, such as journal editorships, review boards, and major committees. This would be one approach to remake psychology along behavioral lines, which was an early ambition of B. F. Skinner. The community of behavior analysts ignored my suggestion, and instead pursued the path of creating an independent discipline of practitioners, one with its own degree-granting programs, conventions, journals, and legal regulation. This effort has been immensely successful, although much critical work remains to be done. In retrospect, I was wrong to suggest changing psychology from within, and I have been delighted to witness the emergence of our new and independent field.

Keywords Behavior analysis · X-Club · Secret Ring · Independent profession

Twenty years ago, I published an article in this journal ambitiously titled *The X Club and the Secret Ring: Lessons on How Behavior Analysis Can Take Over Psychology* (Thyer 1995). In that paper, I described how a cadre of young enthusiasts of the then new Darwinian theory of evolution via natural selection quietly maneuvered to exert covert control over the Royal Society and other influential British scientific organizations and journals, so as to promote empirical research and the professionalization of science. This X-Club (X standing for the unknown) was created by fewer than a dozen men in 1864 and was focused on defending and promoting evolutionary theory, and the careers of similarly-inclined colleagues. They covertly and overtly controlled the

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formal governance of organizations, the editing of journals, and the decisions about who would receive prestigious awards for several decades. They were tremendously successful in promoting evolutionary theory and their colleagues who supported it. Several decades later, in 1913, an analogous group of seven men formed a self-named Secret Ring, dedicated to defending and promoting the new and controversial theory of psychoanalysis developed by Sigmund Freud. This was done with Freud's endorsement, and the group focused on promoting "pure" psychoanalytic publications in existing journals, creating new periodicals and publishing houses, writing favorable book reviews, advocating the practice of psychoanalysis, and encouraging the acceptance of psychoanalytic theory within mainstream medicine, psychology, and other disciplines. For over two decades, the Secret Ring operated covertly, and like the X-Club, was quite successful.

In my 1995 paper, I suggested that behavior analysts might adopt a similar strategy by working within the American Psychological Association (APA), putting each other up for elective and appointive office, editorships, and awards, and, in effect, take over the organization by working strictly within the existing framework of bylaws and rules. Facetiously, I suggested that this group could be called the Committee for the Advancement of Behavior Analysis, or CABAL. I was stimulated by Skinner's early statement, made in 1928 as a doctoral student at Harvard: "...my fundamental interests lie in the field of psychology and I shall probably continue therein, even, if necessary, by making over the entire field to suit myself" (cf. Bjork 1997, p. 81). While professionally successful and widely recognized personally, he failed in this noble ambition. A Division for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior (Division 25, now known simply as Behavior Analysis, devoted to promoting basic and applied research) was approved by the APA in 1964 but scarcely had it been founded when the second issue of the *Division 25 Recorder*, the Division's official newsletter, contained an article discussing the need to reorganize the APA because it did not represent the concerns of experimental psychologists adequately, and whether or not Division 25 and other scientifically-oriented divisions should secede from the APA (Brady 1966)! Division 25 did not leave the APA, and it remains as a division of behavior analysts who identify themselves as psychologists. Its program hours within the immense APA annual convention grow relatively smaller each year as the numbers of newly established divisions proliferates, dividing up the time allocated for behavior analytic topics down to homeopathic proportions.

Skinner occasionally rallied, as in his paper titled *Can the Experimental Analysis of Behavior Rescue Psychology?* (Skinner 1983). But in general, based on my 30-years plus membership in the APA, the field of psychology as a whole seems little interested in our field. Behaviorism as a philosophy of science is generally ignored, unless it is being misrepresented within the mainstream psychology literature. Single-subject research designs are rarely published in APA journals, and operant-based interventions, when written about at all, are usually a component of a therapeutic patchwork given the oxymoronic adjective "cognitive-behavioral" (Thyer 1992). The APA Press publishes few behavior analytic books, but does manage to publish many titles such as *Complementary and Alternative Medicine for Psychologists: An Essential Resource*; *Varieties of Anomalous Experience* (discussing lucid dreaming, alien abduction experiences, and past life, near-death, and mystical experiences); *Dream Work in Therapy*; and *Complementary and Alternative Therapies Research*. Even the current definitions

of “psychology” provided by the APA are antithetical to behavior analysis. Here are two current examples:

- “The scientific study of the behavior of individuals and their mental processes” (<http://www.apa.org/research/action/glossary.aspx>).
- “Psychology is the study of mind and behavior” (<http://www.apa.org/support/about/apa/psychology.aspx#answer>).

Contrast this with the definition of behavior analysis:

- “behavior analysts study how biological, pharmacological, and experiential factors influence the behavior of humans and nonhuman animals”. (<http://www.abainternational.org/abai/behavior-analysis.aspx>)
- “behavior analytic explanations of behavior appeal to natural, physical processes (e.g., environmental events, genetics, neural receptors). They do not appeal to metaphysical phenomena (e.g., free will) and they do not explain one behavior by appealing to another behavior”. (<http://www.abainternational.org/abai/behavior-analysis.aspx>)

Given that the “mind” is completely eschewed as a potential causal mechanism by behavior analysis, it is clear that psychology is quite a different field. Instead of pursuing the path of dominating psychology, as I had suggested, applied behavior analysis has taken a different road—the creation of an autonomous, largely masters-level professional discipline, with its own academic degree-granting programs, practice credentials, independent legal regulation, journals, conferences, and newsletters. While behavior analysis exerts a continuing presence in other applied fields such as social work, education, medicine, etc., it remains a marginalized orientation, as is true within psychology. Far from “rescuing” these other fields (Thyer 1987), behavior analysis is a red-headed stepchild, sometimes grudgingly acknowledged as being effective in limited domains (e.g., autism), but mostly said to be a seriously incomplete orientation which ignores important areas such as the mind, wishes, attitudes, cognitions, etc. No matter—the independent route chosen by behavior analysis has proven to be quite successful thus far, and the upward momentum seems likely to continue. Apart from the solid Association for Behavior Analysis, International, in 2007 the Association of Professional Behavior Analysts (APBA) was founded and has grown remarkably in the past few years, now with over 4000 members, most of whom hold the Board Certified Behavior Analyst® (BCBA®) credential. In 1988, the Behavior Analysis Certification Board® was created and has developed a thriving set of rigorous multi-level practice credentials. Over 13,000 professionals now hold one of the BACB® credentials, not as social workers, or psychologists, or physicians, but with a clear identity as a behavior analyst, and not necessarily affiliated with another field. Nineteen states now license or certify behavior analysts and 37 states require that health insurance cover care for persons with autism, and this includes behavior analysis services (Graff 2014, p. 1). More states are moving in these directions, and third-party vendorship of BCBAs is increasing, making the practice of the field more financially viable. This state of affairs is both surprising and pleasing to me. Even though I am professionally trained as both a psychologist and a social worker, I have

always identified myself as a behaviorist in the Skinnerian tradition, and now the BCBA® and related credentials (Board Certified Associate Behavior Analyst®, and Registered Behavioral Technician®) solidifies the legitimacy of the field.

Behavior analysis and psychology are not quite divorced. Some state psychology licensing boards are attempting to have the legal oversight of behavior analysis placed under their authority, claiming that the practice of behavior analysis is the practice of psychology. This is being vigorous rebuffed by various behavioral organizations. The APA Press has recently purchased (absent any input from Division 25) several low-quality on-line behavior analytic journals, and is attempting to improve them with enhanced editorial board members and peer-reviewing standards. This new APA journal is titled *Behavior Analysis: Research and Practice*, and it remains to be seen how much of a contribution it makes to the field. Division 25 soldiers on within the larger APA, with a small presence on the convention program, and offering half a dozen awards in the field of behavior analysis. Other behavior analysts may belong to different APA divisions (e.g., Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Psychopharmacology and Substance Abuse) but their numbers are few.

So, the field ignored my suggestion to establish a secret agenda to take over the APA. In retrospect, this has been a very good thing. Behavior analysis as an independent professional practice is thriving, far beyond the scope of what I would have believed possible when I joined the ABAI in 1978, and as such is exerting a positive influence within society much greater than if it had remained encapsulated within psychology. With its own training programs, credentials, and journals, it escapes being tarred with the dreamy mentalistic and political baggage associated with the APA. Of course, we behavior analysts wish psychology well, and some of us continue to promote a natural science presence within it, as well as within other disciplines. The experimental analysis of behavior (EAB) as a basic science and the conceptual and philosophical elements of behavior analysis, all continue to maintain a credible presence within the APA, and through non-APA journals and conferences. The APA Press did recently publish an impressive two-volume *APA Handbook of Behavior Analysis*, which contains particularly strong sections on EAB and practice aspects of the field. However, in writing a foreword to this handbook, Murray Sidman, one of the founders of our field, expressed his view on the relations between psychology and behavior analysis:

The American Psychological Association's sponsorship of this handbook might appear to represent a reversal on long-standing and deep-seated philosophical, theoretical, and methodological antagonisms. No such reversal, however, has taken place....This publication however, should not lull students into thinking psychology and behavior analysis are the same....The differences that have caused psychology to reject behavior analysis are real (Sidman 2013, p. xv).

The behavior analyst echoes Walt Whitman, writing in *Leaves of Grass*, "Hurray for positive science! Long live exact demonstration". This poetic phrase captures our field very nicely. Press on, behavior analysts!

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