CHAPTER 5

Toward an Integration of Behaviorism and Community Psychology

Dogs Bark at Those They Do Not Recognize*

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The field of behavioral community psychology has emerged during the last 25 years as a subspecialty of community psychology and applied behavior analysis. It attempts to understand and change community problems through the application of behavioral theory and technology. The field has spawned several textbooks (e.g., Glenwick & Jason, 1980; Nietzel, Winett, MacDonald, & Davidson, 1977), a special issue of Journal of Community Psychology (Glenwick & Jason, 1984), and a compendium of articles originally appearing in the Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, entitled Behavior Analysis in the Community 1968–1986 (Society for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior, 1987). In addition, several recent chapters elaborate the contributions that behavioral researchers can make to community psychology (e.g., Burgoyne & Jason, 1991; Fawcett, 1990). These different sources present compelling theoretical and empirical data to demonstrate the utility and scope of such an approach; yet most contain one of two types of caveats. The first expresses regret that behavioral community psychology has yet to tackle large societal problems. Some authors (e.g., Fawcett, Mathews, & Fletcher, 1980) even suggest that there may be insurmountable obstacles to using behavioral technologies to promote far-reaching community change. The second is that, unfortunately, a synthesis of community approaches and behavioral technology has been delayed because of difficulties delineating turf, choosing problems best suited for a collaboration between the two approaches, and agreeing upon definitions of concepts (Glenwick & Jason, 1993).

These two caveats make quite different points as to the nature of integrating behaviorism

*This is a translation of a “fragment” from the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus.

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with community psychology; however, the conclusion reached is the same: To date, although the behavioral perspective has been adopted by some community psychologists, it has not been wholeheartedly embraced by the dominant ecological model (Duffy & Wong, 1996; Jason & Bogat, 1983; Jason & Crawford, 1991; Jason & Glenwick, 1984). At this point in the history of community psychology, this state of affairs seems perplexing. This chapter will examine why, to date, there has been such minimal collaboration between the two fields, and how a more meaningful partnership might best be effected. Any discussion of the difficulties integrating these two approaches must necessarily consider three separate aspects of behaviorism: its philosophy concerning human behavior, the theories that result from this philosophy, and the technology used to test these theories.

PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES

One of the major determinants in the formation of community psychology was a basic discontent with the asocial nature of psychology. [See Sarason’s (1981) penetrating analysis of clinical psychology’s pertinacious pursuit of the “self-contained” individual.] Early behaviorists anticipated community psychologists by stressing the importance of the context of behavior. Kantor consistently admonished psychologists for ignoring the role of the environment. “Despite the fact that psychological events always consist of fields, psychologists persist in locating their data in or at the organism” (Kantor, 1958, p. 83). His interbehavioral psychology takes its name from his insistence on the importance of understanding individuals’ behavior as “interbehavior” with the environment. Skinner’s radical behaviorism also was concerned with the environment and its influence on behavior, although he conceded that “… the selective role of the environment in shaping and maintaining the behavior of the individual is only beginning to be recognized and studied” (1971, p. 25). Finally, the early rhetoric of the applied behaviorists embraced sociological theories concerned with the influence of culture and society on behavior. For instance, Ullmann and Krasner (1969), in their behavioral approach to abnormal behavior, focused quite strongly, at least in their introductory comments, on the importance of labeling theory.

Thus, the behaviorists, with their emphasis on studying environments and person–environment interactions, helped legitimize these pursuits within the academic community, and hence paved the way for community psychologists. Historically, then, the link between community psychology and behaviorism should have been a natural one; however, there are, as will be discussed below, philosophical differences that have hindered collaboration.

For some years, the field of clinical psychology debated the merits of integrating behavior therapy with more traditional, psychoanalytic therapies. Messer and Winokur (1980) suggested that, in part, the differences between these therapeutic approaches emanated from contrasting assumptions about viewpoints and visions of reality. Portions of their argument also highlight the philosophical differences in community psychology between behaviorism and the mainstream community-ecological model. First, behavioral and community psychology approaches tend to stress contrasting viewpoints on reality (taken from Rychlak, 1968). Behaviorists tend to develop ideas about the world based on their “vantage point as observer, regardless of the subject’s viewpoint” (Messer & Winokur, 1980, p. 822). In contrast, community-ecological psychology approaches emphasize respect for cultural relativity; an emphasis on collaborative, rather than a merely professional, relationship with settings; implementing programs responsive to community needs; etc. All of these values uphold the importance of each person’s competency, not just the professional’s, in defining and solving problems.