The Consummate Skinnerian: Remembering Jack Michael

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“Go ask Jack.” That was the advice often given in hallways at conferences and elsewhere. Jack Michael was our go-to person in behavior analysis for decades. The solution to complex quandaries could be found by just spending a few minutes with Jack, which he usually seized as a teaching opportunity. Teaching was Jack’s passion and primary activity throughout his long professional career. His focus was mainly on B. F. Skinner’s body of works. Jack’s goal as a teacher was for his students to be able to analyze behavior in the same manner that Skinner analyzed behavior. A common mand from Jack to a student was “What would Skinner say?” In a recent interview with Jack, he said, “I was willing to dedicate my life to teaching Skinner, which I pretty much did, and I was quite satisfied with that” (Esch et al., 2017, p. 273).

Jack taught his students how to use the concepts and principles of behavior analysis to think critically about behavioral events. He insisted on precision when talking about behavior. If a student’s answer drifted too far in a cognitive direction, a “BAH!” could be found in the margin along with a possible point loss. Jack diligently prepared each class unit and lecture period, using a modified version of Keller’s (1968) personalized system of instruction (Michael, 1991). At the core of Jack’s classes were his weekly study objectives covering the reading material and his lectures. Students were expected to master the answers to dozens of detailed objectives and demonstrate that mastery on a lengthy essay exam. If a student failed to obtain a satisfactory grade, an equally lengthy remedial exam could be taken in an attempt to improve that grade. Students knew Jack’s classes were hard and required a major time commitment, and sometimes they delayed taking them. But after completing one of his classes, most students were proud of their newfound grasp of behavior analysis and their ability to apply what they had learned. This was especially the case after students took his verbal behavior class.

Jack was easily accessible to students. In addition to informal access, he maintained formal office hours where students could ask him or his graduate assistants questions

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about the reading material or lecture. Students could also present a case for a grade change on an exam question. When I was in his undergraduate Verbal Behavior class (Psych 260) in 1974 (along with about 150 other students), I went into Jack's office to argue for a grade change on my answer to his question on metonymical tacts. I made my case, we talked a bit, and he said, "OK, I'll give you your points back." Then he said, "But, let me look at your answers to these other questions and make sure you are thinking about this clearly." After what seemed like an hour, I was happy to get out of there with my original grade.

All of Skinner's works were important to Jack, but none more so than *Verbal Behavior* (Skinner, 1957). Jack was steadfast in his view that verbal behavior was essential to behavior analysis because "the area of verbal behavior is the link between principles of nonverbal behavior that we share with other species and our uniquely human social and intellectual accomplishments" (Michael, 1984, p. 374). Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior provides a behaviorally consistent account of these human accomplishments, as well as direction for assessment and intervention when social or intellectual repertoires are impaired.

Jack offered a course using *Verbal Behavior* almost every year. As a result, he read and taught from the same passages over and over. This repeated exposure to *Verbal Behavior*, along with his ongoing conversations with Skinner, gave Jack opportunities and permission to refine aspects of the book. It also gave him ample time to develop an efficient way to teach from the book. One of Jack's tussles with *Verbal Behavior* was that Skinner blended the presentation of his basic system (e.g., echoics, mands, tacts, intraverbals, autoclitics, self-editing, listening) with hundreds of interpretive demonstrations. Jack noted, "As a result the reader can overlook the elegant simplicity and power of the explanatory system itself" (Michael, 1957/1992, p. vii).

In his efforts to teach from *Verbal Behavior*, Jack found it valuable to reorganize Skinner's presentation of the material, modify or extend various concepts, and create new distinctions and classifications that Skinner had not considered. In addition, Jack regularly supplemented *Verbal Behavior* with his own material (e.g., his writings on establishing operations and automatic reinforcement) or his students' material (e.g., Norm Peterson's *An Introduction to Verbal Behavior*, Peterson, 1978). Ultimately, Jack's refinements of Skinner's work have extended the power, scope, and utility of *Verbal Behavior* (e.g., Michael, 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988; Vaughan & Michael, 1982).

In 1976, Jack began offering the graduate course Verbal Behavior Applications. He covered several topics over the semester (e.g., ape language learning, sign language, autism, deaf and blind, traumatic brain injury, dementia). Norm Peterson and I were Jack's teaching assistants for the class. Many of the students were working in applied settings and were eager to pursue Skinner's (1957) prediction that "the formulation is inherently practical and suggests immediate technological applications at almost every step" (p. 12). At that time, there was very little applied use of *Verbal Behavior*, and Jack was thrilled when students reported back with data supporting Skinner's prediction. He became increasingly interested in verbal behavior research and started spending more time in applied settings. One of the settings was the Kalamazoo Valley Multihandicap Center (KVMC), a special education school directed by Jerry Shook, which was also a Western Michigan University (WMU) psychology department practicum site.

Several of Jack's graduate students worked at KVMC and were interested in verbal behavior as a thesis or dissertation topic (myself included). Jack began to attend our weekly research meetings at KVMC and provided feedback on the projects that were presented. He also would observe classroom sessions and offer suggestions on procedures (e.g., contriving establishing operations, pairing). Dozens of verbal behavior studies were conducted at KVMC during the 1970s and early 1980s, and many were published. That work, under Jack's guidance, also led to a methodology that used *Verbal Behavior* as the foundation for a language assessment and intervention program for children with autism or other intellectual disabilities (Sundberg, 2014; Sundberg & Michael, 2001; Sundberg & Partington, 1998).

Jack was one of the founders of the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI) and was instrumental in establishing (and helping to fund) ABAI's Verbal Behavior Special Interest Group and this journal, *The Analysis of Verbal Behavior*. These three resources were important vehicles for the early dissemination of verbal behavior content, and remain so today. Through his relentless dedication to the verbal behavior area, Jack rescued Skinner's most important work from obscurity. Thanks to Jack's efforts, Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior has become a highly productive interpretive and practical tool for behavior analysts (for a review, see Petursdottir & Devine, 2017).

Jack's unique personality and approach to teaching inspired many students. John Mabry (2016) noted that while at the University of Houston, Jack's hair was shaved close like a Buddhist monk's and he wore sandals, and "his sandals were later referred to as 'Jesus boots' because he quickly began to attract a following among the students" (pp. 324–325). By the mid 1960s, Jack was recognized by his wild hair, mutton chops, and red Pontiac GTO. Carl Cheney noted, "He seemed much more interested in mentoring us, his groupies, than palling around with faculty buddies" (Mabry, 2016, p. 333). Jon Bailey also noted (in Esch & Esch, 2016) that at Arizona State University in the mid-1960s, Jack taught an informal verbal behavior class for graduate students at his house on Saturdays, something unheard of at the time. Undergraduate students (such as Bailey) tried to sneak in.

At WMU in the 1970s, Jack continued to use his house for academic and social activities. I taught a three-credit sign language class at his house (he was a student in the class). He also hosted social events for visiting behavior analysts, meetings, and weekly discussion groups. For example, from 1978 to 1981, a group of 8 to 10 graduate students met with Jack at his house on Sunday mornings (we called it "Sunday morning with Father Michael"). Our group provided Jack with a verbal community and contingencies to facilitate the completion of the papers he was working on (e.g., see the acknowledgments in Michael, 1979, 1980, and Michael, 1982a). Jack regularly sought out our advice and respected our input. We certainly felt we were getting a much richer education than we might have with only coursework. Jack also fed us on Sundays, which was much appreciated by our group of hungry graduate students. He cared for his other students as well. Jack always brought a coffee cart into his classes with coffee, tea, and snacks (a necessity for keeping up with him, especially in an evening class).

Jack had many interests. He enjoyed all types of music and liked to dance. When the 1977 movie *Saturday Night Fever* came out, he saw it and encouraged us to go see it. We did, and soon a group of us were regularly going out disco dancing with Jack. With his quick wit and lively personality, he was the life of the party. At the annual ABAI socials, Jack could usually be found out on the dance floor in his brown leather jacket dancing the

night away. One of Jack's favorite songs to dance to was "Brown Eyed Girl" by Van Morrison. This song was special to him because his longtime colleague and wife, Alyce Dickinson, was his "Brown Eyed Girl." Alyce and Jack were together for over 40 years.

Jack Michael was the master of Skinner's works, especially *Verbal Behavior*. He understood Skinner better than most and was a formidable opponent to those who challenged a Skinnerian view of behaviorism. For 5 decades, Jack populated the field with a steady stream of highly trained behavior analysts, most of whom trained others. Jack elevated our science, making it stronger and more useful. He was an extraordinary teacher, mentor, and friend. It was an honor to be one of Jack's students and to be part of his mission to advance the science of behavior.

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