



Sustaining Personal Activism: Behavior Analysts as Antiracist Accomplices

Wendy Machalicek¹  · Kathleen Strickland-Cohen¹ · Christine Drew² · Dana Cohen-Lissman¹

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Abstract

One pervasive social issue that has received little attention within the behavior-analytic community is racism and the systemic oppression of Black, Indigenous, and non-Black people of color. The present article offers guidance and examples of how each of us as behavior analysts might build individualized self-management behavior change plans that support initiating and sustaining socially significant antiracism work as we move from allies to accomplices within our own sphere of influence. This article introduces the concept of self-managed antiracism behavior change plans that (a) operationally define antiracist action using measurable outcomes and strategies for data collection on specific antiracist and support actions, (b) provide choices to improve engagement and reduce barriers to adherence, and (c) use effective behavioral interventions to alter the availability of discriminative stimuli or reduce their influence, and increase the availability of reinforcers that are compatible with the goal of the behavior change plan for increasing antiracism behavior and dismantling structures perpetuating racial inequities.

Keywords Antiracism · Activism · Self-management · Social justice

We concede that we are far from expert in antiracism actions, that many scholars who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) have labored to advance the ideals and practices we discuss, and that writing this article may confer us with privilege and influence that we have not earned. At the same time, we share a belief that scholars like us should engage in good-faith efforts to improve our practices, and that we must undertake this work ourselves while aligning the way we go about the work with the suggestions of BIPOC activists. Therefore, this article centers the responsibility of personal behavior change on White people in particular while acknowledging the long-standing and underrecognized activism and efforts of BIPOC to counter racism and dismantle White supremacy.

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—Denisha Gingles, Guest Editor

✉ Wendy Machalicek
wmachali@uoregon.edu

¹ Special Education and Clinical Sciences, University of Oregon, 860 Willow Ave, Eugene, OR 97404, USA

² Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling, Auburn University, AL Auburn, USA

The present day is a time of great duress in the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic has spread unabated in the United States due to slow, inadequate, and disjointed federal, state, and local public health action (Haffajee & Mello, 2020), and as a result, we are facing unprecedented economic and societal challenges that have laid bare long-standing disparities in health care and educational access for Black, Indigenous, and non-Black people of color (BIPOC), as well as people with disabilities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). These minoritized communities and persons with disabilities have experienced greatly disparate morbidity and mortality during the COVID-19 pandemic when compared to healthy White people (Price-Haywood et al., 2020). During this time, Black people, who already experience higher rates of poverty than other Americans due to environmental, medical, and structural racism, have experienced higher rates of unemployment, job loss, and food insecurity and are less likely to have access to technology and educational opportunities (Álvarez, 2020).

During this time, several racially motivated murders sparked an uptick in participation by those not previously engaged with antiracist activism. In February 2020, Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man, was jogging when murdered by three White men who believed Ahmaud to be a criminal (Fausset, 2020). In March 2020, Breonna Taylor, a

26-year-old Black emergency room technician, was murdered at home by police following a no-knock warrant (Oppel & Taylor, 2020). George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black father and grandfather, was murdered by a White police officer on a street in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, during an investigation of an alleged \$20 counterfeit bill used to purchase cigarettes (Taylor, 2020b). Demonstrations began in Minneapolis the day following Floyd's murder, and these protests eventually spread across each of the 50 states, over 400 cities, and more than 60 other countries (Buchanan et al., 2020) and show no signs of stopping in some metropolitan cities even in the face of federally sponsored violence toward protesters.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations and long-standing efforts by Black activists have resulted in meaningful change, including legislation, policy, and funding implications. Democrats in Congress have proposed police reform legislation, including the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020, a bill that supports enhanced federal monitoring of constitutional violations such as excessive use of force by state and local law enforcement, and transparency in efforts to eliminate discriminatory police actions. This bill would lower the criminal intent standard, making it easier to convict a law enforcement officer for knowing or reckless misconduct in a federal prosecution; would restrict qualified immunity as a counter to liability in private civil suits against a law enforcement officer or state correctional officer; and would allow the U.S. Department of Justice to issue subpoenas in investigations of police departments in relation to discrimination. The Minneapolis City Council voted to disband the police department, and Governor Tim Walz of Minnesota announced comprehensive police reform. Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York City reallocated about \$1,000,000,000 from the \$6,000,000,000 police budget to youth and social services (Rubinstein & Mays, 2020). Further, many states and localities have banned choke holds and reviewed police reform efforts, Confederate- and slavery-associated statues have been removed or toppled (Ankel, 2020), and contracts with school resource officers/police have been terminated by several school districts and universities (Balingit et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020a). The aforementioned actions are insufficient to counter the historical cost of White supremacy, and additional action is paramount.

We are at a point in time when our professional organizations are taking more seriously Skinner's, 1982 call to action for those in our field to use our science to address larger social problems and, ultimately, "change the world." (Skinner, 1987). This is evidenced by the formation of special interest groups such as Behavior Analysis for Sustainable Societies and Behaviorists for Social Responsibility, the Association for Behavior Analysis International's (ABAI's) recent stewardship of *Behavior and Social Issues*, and the First Annual ABAI Culturo-Behavior Science Conference highlighting research and practice related to large-scale behavior change and

social activism. Most of the work in our field examining underlying mechanisms of racism such as prejudice, stigma, biases, and cultural competency emerges from relational frame theory, the practice of acceptance and commitment therapy, and related practices such as mindfulness (Levin et al., 2016; Lillis & Hayes, 2007) and perspective taking to mediate the automaticity of established reactions (Todd et al., 2011).

Also of note is the work that individual behavior analysts are doing to better understand and address large-scale societal issues such as poverty (e.g., Lemos & Todorov, 2020), crime, substance misuse, and access to health care (e.g., Anderson-Carpenter et al., 2017; Watson-Thompson et al., 2018), as well as calling for collective action from those in our field (e.g., Biglan et al., 2017; Hantula, 2019; Mattaini, 2019). Board Certified Behavior Analysts are now more than 30,000 strong in the United States, and we have the capacity to influence as individuals, as change agents in our clients' lives, and as members and leaders in the organizations in which we work, in our professional organizations, and in our own neighborhoods, cities, and states.

Personal Work for Behavior Analysts

Behavior analysts are uniquely positioned to understand how inherently racist structures and systems in our environment have reinforced and shaped behavior over time. Yet there is a dearth of behavior-analytic conceptual and empirical research literature focused on how to account for and address racist beliefs and actions and the larger problem of institutionalized racism (Matsuda et al., 2020). This is likely associated with the challenging reality that, as part of a predominately White field, many of us do not directly and regularly experience aversive consequences related to racist actions and policies. For those of us under the influence of motivating operations (MOs; Michael, 1993) to strive for societal change, either for ourselves or on the behalf of others, large-scale social change can feel insurmountable, or it can be all too easy to focus exclusively on more manageable behavior change endeavors. However, although sweeping policy reforms and widespread social movements will indeed be a necessary aspect of sustainable societal change (Mattaini & Aspholm, 2016), our entire field of study is largely predicated on the power of lasting individual behavior change. To choose not to apply our science in areas of social justice or to doubt the efficacy of doing so is tantamount to being complicit in the systematic oppression of and harm to these communities.

As practitioners, scholars, and leaders in the field, it is imperative that we better understand the mechanisms that contribute to racism and racist actions, as well as those mechanisms that can interrupt the development and maintenance of racism and racist actions in U.S. society. Our understanding of human behavior affords us the ability to arrange

environmental contingencies to occasion and reinforce anti-racist behavior, and there is no shortage of resources from outside our field focused on specific anti-racist actions that we as individuals can take and teach to others (e.g., Dominelli, 2017; Embrick & Henricks, 2015; Kendi, 2019; Kivel, 2017; Love, 2019; Malott & Schaeffe, 2015). On a personal level, as White practitioners working with vulnerable populations, we can begin by educating ourselves on the history continuation of racism within the United States, including within our states, communities, and schools, and how racism intersects with ableism and other forms of discrimination (Whitesel, 2017). Having a more thorough understanding of these issues can help us not only to better reflect on our personal biases but also to recognize how inherently racist policies and norms in our society affect everything from our client populations (i.e., those who seek and are eligible to receive our services) to the target skills that we teach as part of our programming. In addition, both in our personal lives and within our organizations, we can create verbal communities with other White behavior analysts (i.e., affinity groups; Blitz & Kohl Jr., 2012) to regularly discuss the issue of racism, identify goals for change, operationalize plans of action, and hold each other accountable for continued progress. BCBAs should actively listen to BIPOC colleagues and clients to acknowledge lived experiences, and also acknowledge the direct impacts of the types of discrimination that people regularly face in the United States.

BCBAs who conduct research can empirically investigate the environmental conditions that occasion and maintain racist behavior, and identify evidence-based anti-racist practices and the conditions under which they are most likely to be effective. For investigators for whom research specifically related to racism is not feasible, including race and ethnicity data for study participants and positionality statements in write-ups and presentations is a small step that can be taken to improve our knowledge and limit bias. Those of us who publish in the field and prepare preservice behavior analysts and other professionals can highlight the work of BIPOC scholars in our writing and teaching; embed culture, diversity, and anti-racism content into Behavior Analyst Certification Board course sequences; and work with colleagues to improve recruitment and retention of students from traditionally marginalized and underrepresented groups. Within our organizations, we can actively seek to create ethnically and racially diverse work environments by instituting policies to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in hiring practices (e.g., advocating for cluster hires of BIPOC faculty; Akpapuna et al., 2020; Muñoz et al., 2017). We can also work to support our BIPOC colleagues by providing mentoring opportunities and working to create inclusive environments that are free from microaggressions (Fong et al., 2017). From our leaders, we can ask for mission

and values statements to be matched by measurable action. One way that we can start is by advocating for the addition of items to the Task List for Board Certified Behavior Analysts and Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts to ensure that those working to become behavior analysts receive supervision and training related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and cultural competence (Beaulieu et al., 2019). These topic areas could also be required in the same way that ethics credits are currently required as part of continuing education for certified behavior analysts practicing in the field.

The Purpose of the Present Article

Clearly behavior analysts have a potentially large role to play given the need for strategies to assist in sustained individual action. This article offers guidance and examples of how behavior analysts might build individualized self-management plans that support the initiation of values-based action and sustained socially significant work within our own individual sphere of influence. We summarize strategies for operationally defining anti-racist action and monitoring our personal progress and offer strategies for self-managing our self-education and personal growth. Although we focus on individual action, it is essential to recognize that allyship and accomplice work are entering into a larger movement led by Black activists (Ransby, 2020) and that individual action alone will not suffice.

Leveraging Principles of Behavior Analysis to Change Our Own Behavior and Sustain Progress

Anyone who has embarked on a new commitment to exercise, started a writing routine, or endeavored to eat more vegetables has encountered roadblocks that prevented timely goal attainment and sustained action. Most of us start with optimism and strong adherence to our plan, but at some point, we fail to adhere to our plan to engage in the desired behaviors—whether completing a marathon, writing a book, or reducing our cholesterol levels. When starting or accelerating our journey to become an anti-racist accomplice, we should expect to encounter the same types of difficulties.

For those who are not Black in America, moving from complicit bystander to accomplice involves the education of oneself about White supremacy and its harms, critical and ongoing examination of our own culture and sources of implicit bias (Machado & Lugo, 2020), accrual of new knowledge that positions the voices of Black authors and activists front and center, and uncomfortable behavior such as speaking up against racism when a family member,

friend, colleague, or neighbor expresses anti-Black sentiments (Okun, 2006). These behaviors and organizational changes are absolutely essential if we care about civil rights and racial equality, but these are effortful actions subject to the principles of behavior, including the variables that influence adherence to self-managed behavior change plans. Several challenges are uniquely inherent to antiracism activism and require consideration when launching a personal behavior change plan. First, Whites do not personally experience the traumatic and ongoing experiences of racism and can more easily set aside effortful and uncomfortable work, allow others to do the work, and make excuses to avoid experiencing negative feelings (Harmon & Burch, 2020).

Second, smaller measurable goals are more easily achieved, but few road maps exist that break down the steps of taking antiracist action. Indeed, becoming an accomplice has no definitive completion goal, as White people continue to be members of the oppressor race. Any self-management plan must operationally define actionable steps that include accomplice behaviors, go beyond verbal behavior of stating solidarity with the BLM movement or disgust for police brutality, and plan for long-term change.

Finally, White supremacy continues because it is self-perpetuated by individuals who have been cautioned not to cause other White people discomfort by calling out racism, and there is a relative lack of accountability for self-education and professional growth as an accomplice (e.g., no current Behavior Analyst Certification Board requirement for continuing education units centers on equity and inclusion, and no Task List items focus on these issues). These barriers, although not insurmountable, do pose challenges to adherence to any plan of action we create to engage in activism to support civil rights, and offer insight into the potential operant function of antiracist action (e.g., private events, recognition of peers) or failure to engage in antiracist action (e.g., private events, avoidance).

Fortunately, the issue of decreased adherence has long been a topic of study in behavioral science and medicine (Pérez-Jover et al., 2019; Wiecek et al., 2019). Several theories have been developed and empirically tested to explain the potential reasons for declining treatment adherence or the degree to which a person adheres to proscribed health behavior change. Theories with close alignment to applied behavior analysis include the transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska et al., 1992). This model included the following processes: (a) consciousness raising, (b) choice of options, and (c) contingency control. A key conceptual point is that this model accepts that, on the way to habit development, an individual cycles through stages of change including precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983).

Self-Management Strategies to Initiate and Sustain Behavior Change Related to Antiracism Activism and Accomplice Work

In the section that follows, we introduce and discuss guiding principles of creating an effective, sustainable self-management plan that uses the principles and practices of behavior analysis to address some of the aforementioned challenges to personal behavior change. Table 1 provides examples of self-management strategies. Antiracist activism takes place along a continuum from actor to ally to accomplice (Osler, 2020), and we have strived to include accomplice-type behaviors as examples when discussing self-management strategies in an effort to avoid encouraging performative acts that fail to challenge White supremacy. As allies and accomplices, we should strive to follow Kayla Reed's helpful mnemonic, ALLY: always center the impacted, listen and learn from those who live in the oppression, leverage your privilege, and yield the floor (Reed, 2016).

Operationally Define Action and Monitor Progress

Activism and efforts to self-educate, advocate, and protest may maintain in the absence of an operational definition if linked to Black-led movements and organizations that provide guidance on the when and how of action. However, as with other self-management plans, we anticipate improved effectiveness when antiracism goals are operationally defined to be measurable and observable to ensure we know what to do and to allow for tracking our progress toward engaging in the desired or terminal behavior. For example, a behavior analyst working in higher education might track daily minutes spent on writing that is focused on racial equity or monthly minutes spent reviewing course syllabi for inclusion of BIPOC scholars. A behavior analyst in private practice might evaluate their progress by minutes spent monthly supporting early career behavior analysts in their state who are BIPOC, which could include lifting their work on social media and inviting them to provide paid professional development related to their areas of content expertise. Many of us have purchased nonfiction and fiction books written by BIPOC authors and could track minutes spent reading each weeknight and the number of concrete actions (e.g., researching, following, and financially supporting prison abolitionist organizations after reading a book on the topic of racism and the prison industrial complex) that we take based on our increased knowledge. Graphical representations (e.g., line graphs, histograms, daily bubbles to fill in on a bullet journal) of our goal progress can provide needed self-reinforcement (e.g., McDougall, 2012).

Table 1 Example self-management strategies

| Choices & antecedent reminders | Self-education | Contingency management |
|--|---|--|
| Identify, follow, join, and contribute to racial justice organizations in your community and nationally to motivate personal change (for a partial map, see http://mendozao.github.io/Resource-Generation-Map/app/index.html). | Break down antiracism work into discrete, manageable, and measurable steps (e.g., read 15 min each night from a fiction or nonfiction book written by a Black woman every weekday). | Pair work supporting activism with putative reinforcers (e.g., attend online events with a favorite notebook and beverage). |
| Follow @antiracismcalendar on Instagram and complete daily tasks. | Pool group finances to pay a Black author or activist to speak to your antiracism book club or organizations. | Organize/participate in an antiracist activism accountability group of White colleagues—operationally define long-term goals and meet regularly to encourage forward progress in individual and group activism. |
| Engage in mindfulness practice to assist with values-driven action. | Assign supervisees BIPOC-authored readings that support them in learning about how to work effectively with minoritized clients and their families. | Graph, evaluate progress, and self-reward behavior associated with your antiracism activism goals. Examples of goals include total dollars donated, count of Black-led events attended, number of minutes written (e.g., letters to the editor, practitioner publications), or count of protests attended. |
| Set personal calendar reminders to complete specific actions (e.g., schedule a donation to a Black-led activist organization, write a letter to a local official). | Make antiracism and cultural sensitivity a priority topic in supervision. Include reminders on any supervision checklist. | Plan tangible rewards for adherence to your plan that are compatible with retribution (purchases from Black-owned businesses). |
| Tie activism actions to another already-engrained habit to increase automaticity (e.g., weekend household purchases tied to purchases from Black-owned businesses). | | |
| Post behavioral expectations in the workplace; during online meetings with scripted examples for White employees to speak up about White supremacy, racism, and bias during staff meetings; and during professional development. | | |

BIPOC Black, Indigenous, and people of color

Identify Barriers to Personal Growth

We can proactively identify and plan for barriers that may arise. For instance, if there are concerns about having limited time to engage in activism, some actions can be automated, such as arranging regular, monthly electronic donations to Black-led organizations. If an individual often finds themselves too tired to attend events after the workday, they can sign up for only those events that will be recorded for later viewing. If a person finds themselves lacking motivation, they could schedule regularly occurring low-effort podcasts or movies to jump-start the work. If a person is routinely too stressed to take on additional work, they could consider scheduling short meditation and/or exercise sessions to alleviate stress and schedule a calendar reminder to come back to their activism plan once they have engaged in self-care.

Give Yourself Options

We assume that the reader is committed to some form of antiracist action and encourage exploration of potential actions along the actor-to-ally-to-accomplice continuum, choosing uncomfortable actions where possible to scaffold personal progress, and then development of a self-management plan to sustain action. Antiracist actions take many forms (e.g., protest; use of money; in our jobs, homes, and neighborhoods; when educating our children, voting, and volunteering), and this article does not provide a summary of these forms of

action, which are well described elsewhere (Osler, 2020). Additionally, for those behavior analysts who work in an organization, we encourage formally and anonymously surveying BIPOC employees to ensure any individual actions toward larger organizational change are meaningful. Choices may change over time in relation to an individual's time, money, and community connections, and the goal should be to flexibly design an activism plan to ensure sufficient choices for times when identified barriers present. To decrease early abandonment of an intervention due to poor contextual fit or barriers that arise, personal activism plans should include several strategies that can be selected to implement based on one's level of energy and mood (Ouellette & Wood, 1998).

Raise Consciousness Through Self-Education

MOs result in a *temporary* alteration in the value of a consequence and an alteration in the rate of the behavior the organism engages in to obtain the consequence (Cooper et al., 2020). As one example, the top 10 *New York Times* best sellers in June 2020 were about antiracism, but it is unclear how many of these books have been read and how many readers took any action after reading these books (L. M. Jackson, 2020). Nevertheless, increased access to information for learning and teaching about antiracism is readily available to shape our behavior as individuals, organizations, and communities, and curated collections of articles, books, videos, podcasts, and movies exist to assist in self-education on

Black and Indigenous history, abolition efforts, colonization and systematic racism, personal racialization processes (White, 2020), reparations to acknowledge and repair anti-Blackness (Coates, 2014), and participation in Black-led collective actions (Schillinger, 2020)

Manage Contingencies

It is difficult to imagine reinforcing oneself for “doing the right thing,” but reinforcement is necessary for the acquisition and generalization of behavior, and relying on accolades from others for supporting human rights is considered distasteful in antiracism work (R. G. Jackson et al., 2020). The work of activism is often publicly shared during the process of activism (e.g., sharing a fundraiser on social media), but the outcomes are more typically privately celebrated (Li, 2020). In addition to values exploration that links our activism to meaning and a sense of purpose, we encourage scheduling self-delivered preferred consequences that are compatible with the goal of increasing antiracism behavior and dismantling structures perpetuating racial inequity (e.g., purchase self-care or household items from Black-owned businesses for oneself or as gifts, order a meal from a Black-owned restaurant). Additionally, individuals can arrange contingencies that trap desired behavior—for instance, volunteering to serve on a committee focused on antiracism for regular accountability checks. Punishment of our actions by others or changing the behavior of others is not covered in this article, but we must be ready to minimize the sting of punishment when we make other White people uncomfortable by calling out racism and when we put ourselves in other tough interpersonal situations to counter racism, such as discussing current events with family members and friends who are not engaging in antiracist behavior.

Provide Yourself with Antecedent Reminders

Many local municipalities, states, workplaces, educational institutions, professional organizations, and individuals have been forced to grapple with their own existing racist structures, practices, and inequities, resulting in public statements renouncing White supremacy and committing to antiracist actions, some of which include reparations and donations to activist organizations. The MOs produced by these events will fade for those farther from the negative impacts of racism; personalized action plans and antecedent reminders will be useful replacements for naturally occurring discriminative stimuli to sustain progress—that is, arranging clear and repeated discriminative stimuli such as setting calendar reminders to engage in action or assess progress, drinking from a mug that includes a proactivist message, signing up for email Listserv subscriptions, and linking new behavior to other ingrained

habits such as reading at bedtime and listening to podcasts while exercising.

Monitor Your Progress

Scheduling a regular check-in that is tied to another routine, such as planning for the week ahead in a planner, to graph or otherwise document progress is essential to identify when to self-reinforce and when to adapt our self-management strategies to achieve antiracist actions and outcomes that we personally value. Forgetting to engage in planned activities or otherwise failing to follow through with behavior change plans is common to us all, so an attitude of generosity and kindness toward oneself is needed, as is a willingness to return to committed action when we notice a decline in our behavior. When noticing a decline, a person should review the available data, identify any potential MOs and actions to boost motivation or remove barriers, adjust the goals to reduce effort and renew interest, renew self-administered reinforcement, and refresh or change the delivery modality of antecedent reminders.

Concluding Thoughts

We set out to examine the extent to which our knowledge and practices as behavior analysts might be helpful in sustaining our own efforts as individuals, employees, and scholars. We have produced a humble example of how we might inform potential individual actions that we can take to sustain our efforts in antiracist activism, and have described some self-management strategies to sustain personal growth and action. We encourage behavior analysts to build and enact plans of individual, organizational, and cultural change that can be sustained without an end in sight. The larger social contexts in which we operate matter a great deal, and individual behavior change alone is unlikely to advance human rights and decrease harm to people who are BIPOC. The ideas advanced in this article are not intended to represent an exhaustive list of antiracist behaviors that behavior analysts can engage in, but rather are one small part of the action needed to change inherently racist and inequitable systems. Nevertheless, we posit that individual behavior change is essential to continue the push toward becoming antiracist as a field and as a society.

Declarations

Informed Consent This article did not involve human subjects and/or animals so did not necessitate informed consent.

Conflict of Interest The authors do not have any potential conflicts of interest to disclose related to this article.

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