Introduction to Special Issue: A Creative Collaboration

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This special issue of The Psychological Record marks a concerted and consistent effort on the part of all involved to tackle an important and interesting area of study that is often not directly addressed in the science of behavior: creativity. Creativity is one of those performances often characterized as beyond the reach of mere behaviorists, who toil away at our lower forms of learning according to a seemingly endless supply of introductory psychology texts. In general, creativity is thought to be part of the grand unknowable, a force that erupts from the ether, a product of the grand and elusive mind, and therefore designed to resist any attempts to understand the phenomenon with any degree of precision. Further, we often think of creativity only when we think of highly original, rare, and profound behavior, such as Picasso’s Guernica, Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, and the Apollo 13 mission controllers’ success in generating a new source of power to make a successful landing. However, when we deconstruct the processes related to these extraordinary events, we can see that many people engage in creative behavior every day. The articles in this special issue also demonstrate that understanding creative behavior is part of the behaviorists’ remit, for all forms of behavior are intended to be part of our self-assigned jurisdiction, whether they be respondent or operant, inherited or learned, overt or covert, simple or complex.

As readers may be aware, creativity was a topic tackled by B. F. Skinner, starting with Science and Human Behavior (1953) and continuing in other publications and lectures. Just as Darwin studied the role of outcomes to understand the development of new species, behavior analysts study the role of outcomes to understand the development of new behavior. In the present case, we’re interested in a particular type of new behavior—those patterns of behavior that are unusual to the casual observer and yet valued by society. The particular case of creativity does not break the mold of determinism or behaviorism, as evidenced by several of the publications in this special issue. The topic of creativity in behavior analysis has not always garnered the attention it deserves. Although there were certainly publications over the years as our scientific understanding of human behavior evolved, creativity has often been eclipsed by other pressing topics in the field. However, all behavior important to society is also important to us.

We are thankful that the recent emphasis on themes across program committees at the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI) provided us with opportunity, space, and connections to organize a special track theme on the topic of “Creativity” at the 45th Annual Convention in Chicago, Illinois (2019). At that convention, 10 events were scheduled on the topic, including 3 special sessions, 1 symposium, 3 additional papers, and 2 panel sessions. It was during this convention that we approached Mitch Fryling with the idea to create a call for papers, which were initially due in early 2020.

And then the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. As this worldwide event affected every sector, we found ourselves in the same boat as authors and reviewers. We were all “pivoting, shifting, and adapting” to a significant change in our environments. It was as if there was no better example of a creative shift unfolding before us as we all increased our use of current technology and learned completely novel ways of meeting, connecting, and otherwise completing our work. With that shift came increased time spent in online meetings, answering larger amounts of email, and for some additional responsibilities at home. So today, we are feeling most fortunate to have finally completed this work. We provide readers with what we think is an interesting and impactful tapestry of articles related to behavior analytic accounts of creativity.

Many of the articles in this issue sprouted out of the earlier convention but blossomed during a most difficult and challenging time in history. But this is the creative process, isn’t it? After all, “creativity” is behavior emitted under a
given set of circumstances and involves novel behavior that
is viewed by the community as “creative.” In general, this
means that the behavior must demonstrate or produce some
new creative product or output, or at least improve upon
previous creative work in some substantial manner. To do
so, we must identify, create, or stumble upon a problem to
be solved or a solution to be provided. The pandemic cer-
tainly provided opportunities for many, and the authors who
have contributed to this issue provide us with reading that
often transcends one specific instance or series of instances
to larger explanations of behavior.

Summer raises the question that sparks the creativity in
all of us: Can we even talk about it? Her exploration of
Wittgenstein’s argument related the use of such words as
being a product of the verbal community in which we find
ourselves. It makes a nice connection to Butcher’s work on
metaphorical extensions in the artistic and scientific com-

munities. Readers will be interested to consider both meta-
phorical tacts and mands, and that perhaps the consideration,
extension, and investigation of creativity in our field is both
an art and a science. If so, then the verbal communities from
various sectors are needed to provide a complete account of
creative behavior.

Marr takes us through his latest thinking on the com-
plexities involved in defining “creativity” and its importance
for the field. His insightful analysis suggests that talent and
expertise must be developed, and of course solving the issue
of motivation is paramount. Behavior analysts will know that
shaping is a complex procedure involving successive use
of both extinction and reinforcement. The extinction burst
is necessary, but not sufficient, to produce novel behavior:
the process of extinction involves varying behavior along
some dimension(s), but reinforcement is what makes con-



Given the impact of the pandemic, the authors of
these articles encourage the reader to consider the
potential for generativity in our field, and to explore
new avenues for creativity and innovation. By doing so,
we can continue to push the boundaries of what is possi-
ble, and to expand our understanding of the complex
processes that underlie creative behavior.