



## Conceptual Articles

## Where is the love? Contextual behavioral science and behavior analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores some tensions between contextual behavioral science (CBS) and radical behaviorism or behavior analysis (BA), particularly with respect to the study of emotion. We contrast Darrow and Follette's (2014) discussion of alexithymia from a radical behavioral perspective, which we view as representing a traditional behavior analytic approach, with a CBS approach, as we understand it. As a convenient anchor for our discussion, we discuss how CBS and BA might view the term "love." We present suggestions for how "love" may be used as a middle-level term in a CBS approach, and why usage of such middle-level terms is important to the mission of CBS to create a science more adequate to the challenges of the human condition.

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## 1. Introduction

As the Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science (CBS) evolves, its content, as much as anything, will define Contextual Behavioral Science. Thus, it was wise that Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, and Wilson (2012), in the inaugural issue of this Journal, articulated in detail the nature, scope and purpose of CBS:

Contextual Behavioral Science (CBS) is a principle-focused, communitarian strategy of reticulated scientific and practical development. Grounded in contextualistic philosophical assumptions, and nested within multi-dimensional, multi-level evolution science as a contextual view of life, it seeks the development of basic and applied scientific concepts and methods that are useful in predicting-and-influencing the contextually embedded actions of whole organisms, individually and in groups, with precision, scope, and depth; and extends that approach into knowledge development itself so as to create a behavioral science more adequate to the challenges of the human condition.

Our purpose, here, is to explore some of the implications of this definition, specifically with respect to tensions between CBS, radical behaviorism, behavior analysis (BA) and the study of emotion. We contrast Darrow and Follette's (2014) discussion of alexithymia from a radical behavioral perspective, which we view as representing a traditional behavior analytic approach, with a

CBS approach, as we understand it. As a convenient anchor for our discussion, we discuss how CBS and BA might view the term "love." We choose love because of new interest in this topic, particularly in relation to Functional Analytic Psychotherapy (FAP; Tsai, Kohlenberg, Kanter, Kohlenberg, Follette, & Callaghan, 2009), an approach with which we (JWK and GH) have worked with Darrow and Follette – often quite lovingly – as treatment developers, researchers, and trainers. We hope this response to their article, although it represents a different perspective in several fundamental ways, does not change that.

## 1.1. The relationship between CBS and BA

The relationship between CBS and BA is fundamental to the identity of CBS and, from our perspectives as members of both the CBS and BA communities, pivotal with respect to the degree to which CBS will meet its pragmatic, stated mission: To create a behavioral science more adequate to the challenges of the human condition.

While some may read into the CBS mission statement the clear implication that traditional behavioral (i.e., radical behavioral, behavior analytic) science was, essentially, inadequate to the challenge, it is important in our view to remain true to, without enshrining, the fundamental contributions of BA scientific practices and concepts to the development of CBS. Specifically, as noted by Hayes et al. (2012), CBS has roots in BA as both a philosophical system and as a source of basic principles. Both CBS and BA focus on the identification of functional relations of actions of the whole organism and the environment, and in so

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doing, emphasize variables that are pragmatically useful in achieving prediction-and-influence.

This has large implications. At its core, CBS is a science designed, from the ground up, to produce findings that influence – by intention, not by happy accident – those who are working on human behavior problems, at the human scale: Psychotherapy, education, organizational psychology, racism/discrimination, behavioral patterns of public health significance (obesity, safety, addiction), human conflict and cooperation, peace and love.

### 1.2. Traditional behavior analytic mandates

The emphasis on prediction and influence in traditional BA creates the mandate that analyses should trace the causes of a behavior back into either the historical or current context of the individual. The flip-side of this mandate is an aversion to analyses that stop at, or even emphasize, feelings, thoughts, biological variables, or other private phenomena, as significant causes of behavior. The idea is to define and focus on variables that are useful for intervening in specific contexts, e.g., events that can be manipulated in therapy. This emphasis on history and context was a necessary and useful corrective to other early theories of psychology that focused excessively on intrapsychic phenomena and did so in ways that were not seen as particularly useful for behavioral scientists who hoped to achieve prediction-and-influence of human behavior through science. Focusing on the nature of the intrapsychic phenomenon itself, rather than environmental antecedents and consequences, required too many assumptions about the nature of the experience for behavioral scientists, and took them too far from direct prediction and influence (e.g., Skinner, 1953).

For example, consider the emotional expression, “I love you.” Of course, there are many reasons why a person may utter such an expression. For our purposes, let us assume one mainstream view that a person states “I love you” as in “I am having a feeling of love towards you.” The assumption is that the person is referring to what he or she perceives to be an emotional state – love – that has an essential composition: a condition of the body, presumably with a physiological basis. The traditional behavior analytic view has problems with this mainstream view because it is argued that there is no actual, essential, reliable referent within the body to which most emotion words refer. Emotion words, instead, refer to loose, poorly defined categories – the very private nature of the referent makes it hard to define with precision (Moore, 1980).

This idea is supported, as cited by Darrow and Follette (2014), by studies indicating that physiological data do not reliably correspond to reports of emotional states. Accordingly, BA may take as its focus of study *the behavior of referring to the emotion* and then looks to identify more reliable, manipulable causes of this behavior outside of the body (e.g., Skinner, 1945). To put it technically, love as an emotion (where emotion is equivalent to a condition of the body) is not a sufficiently precise stimulus condition to serve as a discriminative stimulus for the tact “I love you.” A more pragmatic and precise account requires looking outside the body for the causes of the tact, rather than inside the body for the nature of love.

As behavior analysts look for environmental causes, they also emphasize that each individual’s history and context is unique such that topographically similar behaviors may have very different functions depending on the person’s history and context. Thus BA also has traditionally mandated individualized (‘idiographic’) *de novo* functional analyses of each individual client and their environmental context to guide interventions, avoiding topographical descriptions and unassessed assumptions of all kinds – whether mentalistic or functional (e.g., Darrow, Dalto, & Follette, 2012).

Putting these two principles into action, Darrow and Follette (2014), in their behavioral analysis of alexithymia, focused on the

public accompaniments of emotion, specifically verbal emotional expressions, and defined alexithymia as a deficit with respect to such publicly observable emotional expressions. The task then became describing various environmental conditions and learning histories that could result in deficits with respect to emotional expression, rather than focusing on the quality of, content of, or individual differences with respect to any private stimuli relevant to emotional expression. To stay true to the mandate that idiographic functional analyses are performed, the discussion presented multiple possible histories that might produce deficits that might reasonably be labeled alexithymic, and focused on how the therapist may assess what is relevant for and how to tailor interventions to each particular client.

To continue our discussion of love, a behavioral analysis in line with Darrow and Follette’s (2014) approach might define the conditions in which one would likely utter the words, “I love you.” For example, one might say “I love you” when in the presence of a person whose responses have significant eliciting, evoking, and especially reinforcing stimulus functions with respect to one’s own behaviors, especially those behaviors that would be punished in most other social situations (Cordova & Scott, 2001).

Interestingly, while the term “alexithymia” was the starting point for Darrow and Follette’s (2014) analysis, the analysis itself, by focusing simply on the idiographic contingencies around verbal emotional expressions, arrives at a set functional descriptions of clinical presentations that would, in our judgment, be more likely labeled something other than alexithymic. The analysis is not specific to those circumstances in which a client would likely be labeled alexithymic by a therapist, but rather represents a primer on how traditional clinical behavior analysis might approach problems with emotional expression, broadly defined. Essentially the term alexithymia is left behind in favor of what are expected to be clinically useful analyses of clinical presentations. The overall result is what a good analysis of a problematic mentalistic term should achieve in traditional behavior analysis: a fuzzy term is replaced with an analysis in which the original phenomenon is recognizable, yet the conditions for and variations in the behavior of interest are much more precisely defined.

From either a CBS or BA perspective, the term “alexithymia” is problematic. It is not precise; nor is there much indication that it can function usefully as a middle-level term (discussed below), even if imprecise. It probably will not map well with other scientific disciplines; thereby the term does not add depth to our science. By submitting the term to a functional analysis, a set of potentially more precise and clinically useful contingencies can be identified.

The problem is that such a behaviorally precise and exhaustive exercise – to define the construct of emotion in terms of all possible public antecedents to and consequences of the public verbal expressions of emotion words, without actually referencing any qualities or characteristics of private emotional experience itself, and expecting the therapist to perform a sophisticated assessment each time a new case is presented – is a whole lot of work. The analysis also results in language that strains common ways of talking and is often incomprehensible to the layperson – this is fine if the goal is purely talk among behavioral scientists but not if it is talk between a therapist and client, or between therapists of different orientations. It is indeed very difficult to purge more conventional ways of speaking about emotion from the analysis. Conducting this analysis alone requires considerable behavior analytic sophistication – let alone collaborating with a client in the analysis and then operating within it to therapeutic effect.

Most importantly, given the pragmatic nature of our science, this whole strategy had better pay off in terms of clinical or some other applied utility. Darrow and Follette (2014) argue that this is indeed the case: The analysis *should* be more useful to the

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