

## **EDITORIAL: CULTURAL ANALYSIS AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN MEDELLÍN**

Skinner was more than 'just' a psychologist but rather also a philosopher and, above all, a social reformer.... To my knowledge, he was the first scientist to anticipate the current crises of ecology and pollution in the world. Furthermore, he suggested a radical solution to them. In the present global crisis, that, in itself, would justify taking another and very careful look at him. In my view, survival itself could well depend upon a better understanding and application of the science of human behavior.

This quotation from the preface of Frederick Toates new biography of B.F. Skinner reminds us that behavior analysis has been concerned with social change from its very earliest days (see Peter Lamal's review of Toates' book later in this issue.) The Fall 2010 issue of *The Behavior Analyst*, the flagship journal of the Association for Behavior Analysis: International, begins with an extensive special section entitled "The Human Response to Climate Change: Ideas From Behavior Analysis." And the lead article in this issue of *Behavior and Social Issues* ("Sustainability: From Excess to Aesthetics" by Lyle Grant) is a particularly important advance, clarifying the behavioral issues involved and outlining the (difficult but ultimately reinforcing) steps that must be taken for survival. João Claudio Todorov's brief article on "Global Warming and Local Indifference" adds an additional perspective on action for sustainability.

In less direct ways, each of the other articles in this volume represents efforts to support human betterment and environmental action. Still, we need many more hands-on efforts to use principles of cultural analysis to support social change. I recently had the opportunity to see the beginnings of such work in what might appear to be an unlikely venue, and I want to share some observations about that project here. I want first, however, to encourage behavior and cultural analysts who are working in areas of social importance, even in very preliminary ways, to share the work they are doing in the journal. Brief reports of first efforts may well serve as establishing operations for others, particularly committed young behavior analysts, to devote their work to critical human and environmental issues. And it will require devotion; one or two conceptual articles about a major social issue will not turn any significant tide. I share the material below in this spirit.

### **Cultural Analysis and Social Change in Medellín**

*La Violencia* has been the most powerful social burden born by the people of Colombia for over 60 years. Political, structural, and social violence—including that perpetrated by insurgents, paramilitaries, narco-traffickers, military and police forces, powerful international economic actors, and individuals within an interlocking matrix of violence—has created terrible pain, suffering and loss for people and communities (World Bank, 2000). The good news is that rates of homicides and some other forms of severe violence have declined dramatically over the past two decades in most of the country, although the trend has been uneven. These improvements reflect the often tireless work of many actors, including government officials, NGOs, and private citizens. In Medellín, which reached an all-time high of 381 homicides per 100,000 population in 1991, there was a particularly dramatic decline in more recent years, dropping to 33.8 per 100,000 in 2007 (Llana, 2010). Deeply dedicated efforts to rebuild community pride and commitment began in Medellín in 2003, spearheaded by Mayor Sergio Fajardo who was elected in 2004. This work focused preferential attention on the poorest areas. There was a strong and explicit effort to shift culture among the general population, rich and poor:

“The idea was to stop the thinking that because people are poor they should get the poorest things,” says Laura Villa, who works with an organization for the mayor's office to promote Medellín internationally. “So that people feel dignified and value their neighborhoods.” (Quoted in Llana, p. 2)

With the 2008 arrest of crime boss Don Berna, however, a new struggle for control of narco-trafficking emerged. The homicide rate nearly tripled to 94.5 in 2009. Demobilized paramilitaries provided some of the manpower for the drug war, as did *bandas delincuentes*—criminal youth gangs whose members were often very poor, poorly integrated into society, and deeply integrated into the drug trade (Ramirez, n.d.). Deeply aware of these new challenges, over the past several years a visionary police officer-sociologist, Teniente Coronel Omar Eduardo Rojas Bolaños, Comandante of the Communitarian Police of Medellín, with the support of General Oscar Naranjo, Director of the National Police, and other senior officers, began his own series of experiments to shift culture in Medellín. These efforts give particular attention to opening opportunities for young people from the poorest *comunas* of the metropolitan area. New community policing methods were initiated with the objective of rebuilding a “sense of community” among police, young people, and neighborhoods. A sense of community, of

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course, is constituted from a set of interlocking contingences, as is a culture of violence.

On a recent visit to Medellín, we had the opportunity to spend time with rank and file community police, with youth police cadets often drawn from the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, with gang members interested in leaving that life, with neighborhood leaders, and with citizens. In one area we visited that had been heavily engaged in Rojas' project because of extreme rates of violence, the homicide rate was reported to have dropped by half in recent months. Experienced police officers patrolling the streets on foot emphasized that with the new communitarian policing practices, police and community had again become "one family." A police officer with a machete scar across his cheek—a veteran of the conflicts with narco-traffickers and insurgents—emphasized that community policing was all about loving the people. Two police officers we interviewed were so enthusiastic about the new strategy that they volunteered to come to Chicago to teach the Chicago Police Department how to police with love. There is much more; there is serious discussion about expanding this new form of communitarian policing nationwide, based on promising initial outcomes.

Of course this is anecdotal information, and there remain many problems and challenges; homicide rates are still far too high especially in Medellín and Cali; official corruption has not disappeared; narco-traffickers, insurgents and demobilized paramilitaries remain serious obstacles; not everyone in the National Police has embraced the new directions; and taking a project led by a charismatic figure to scale will be enormously difficult. Coronel Rojas and his family also face significant personal risk; they have been threatened—and fired upon—in public. But the level of police morale we observed was extraordinary, whether among senior commanders, street police, or the newest cadets. And there is considerable excitement present across many sectors of society, including government, NGOs, media, business, and the arts. Many of the people we visited had a clear understanding that "we make the road by walking" (Horton & Freire, 1990)—that cultural change emerges only from actually changing cultural practices.

Which brings us to cultural analysis. As Coronel Rojas and his colleagues labored to refine and expand their efforts, they reached out to as many outside resources as they could. In November of 2010, they organized a large forum (the first *Simposio Internacional de Coexistencia Y Convivencia Ciudadana*) in Medellín, drawing from national and international sources—with particular outreach to behavior analysts, who are held in some regard in Colombia (and throughout much of Latin America). The emphasis of the forum was on constructing peaceful communities of coexistence, with particular emphasis on

new ways to work with members of *bandas delincuentes*. The almost exclusive focus on constructional approaches (in Israel Goldiamond's 1974/2002 sense) was particularly encouraging. Senior behavior analysts and related scientists and scholars like Blanca Ballesteros, Marithza Sandoval, Pablo Páramo B. (all of Colombia); Christine Lowery (US); Humberto Trujillo, Jon Aldeiturriaga, and Fernando Justicia J. (of Spain); and Macarena Rau of Chile participated with local and national government figures, representatives of NGOs and the education system, and hundreds of police officers. (The culture of the police was a central focus for the forum).

Those of us participating in the forum prepared papers, participated in formal conversations, and offered programmatic consultation. Research from around the world was shared. Successful approaches not designed by behavior or cultural analysts were mined for central behavioral principles that likely underlay their effectiveness. These analyses suggested adaptations that might be tested locally, and clarified what dimensions may be most crucial to maintain in the adaptation process. Very basic principles like the dynamics of choice behavior, the dynamics of extinction, differential reinforcement, and networks of concurrent contingencies were integrated into the presentations and discussions, and received serious attention. Diagrammatic approaches to analysis drew attention to multiple interlocking contingencies that are relevant to understanding, preventing, and intervening in matrices of violence, and constructing cultures of respect and healing.

My experience in my four visits to South America has been one of broad openness, even eagerness, to embrace the science of behavior to address serious human problems like violence and sustainability. There is, I believe, tremendous opportunity here for collaborative research. It seems clear that even quite straightforward behavioral principles and methods, like matching, the analysis of interlocking contingencies, and identification of supporting and opposing cultural practices (Biglan, 1995) can contribute to the kinds of efforts that we observed in Medellín. As cultural analytic science advances, it seems likely that partnerships like those behavior analysts are developing in Colombia and Brazil could contribute to human and cultural survival in ways that at present can only be vaguely envisioned. Our responsibility is to ensure that the work that Skinner began continues to contribute in areas of greatest social importance, even though our first efforts may be rudimentary (and we surely must be entirely transparent about how little we know). Cultural analysts will learn the most if we get our hands dirty in the real problems the world faces. Even as we continue to pursue laboratory studies that may help sort out basic principles (a strategy that has worked so well in behavior analysis), we should recognize that some principles

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may only become apparent in complex community contexts. These first efforts, however primitive, may inspire the next generation toward further advances.

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