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A Systematic Review of Gender Issues in Behavior Analytic Research

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Abstract

It is well documented in research and practice that the majority of behavior analytic literature is predominantly inclusive of participants with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and in particular, autism spectrum disorder. Recent research has shown the individuals with autism are significantly more likely to identify as LGBT+. Beyond that, behavior analysis has been shown to be effective in many public health domains in gay and lesbian populations; however, despite these findings, these principles and applications remain under-researched. The purpose of the current review is to identify interventions and research articles that are specific to LGBT+ issues in the ABA literature and outline the ways in which behavior analysis has contributed to LGBT+ social services. The current search yielded twenty-four articles (N=24) in total across four prominent behavior analytic journals. Trends and important findings are discussed as well as recommendations for researchers and clinicians to act in light if these results.

Introduction

There is no question that the vast majority of behavior-analytic research is aimed at participants diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). For instance, Jones et al. [1] found that ASD diagnosis was the second most reported participant demographic in the Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis (JABA) between the years of 2013-2019. Moreover, Pritchett et al. [2] found that the reporting of diagnosis varied across 10-year intervals spanning 50 years of publications in JABA. Despite behavior analysis's wide and varied possibility for application, there are many systems at play that contain clinical and research provisions to neurodevelopmental disorders. Recent research on ASD, a complex disorder for which our understanding is ever-changing, has revealed various heterogeneous genetic profiles and symptom clusters (e.g., psychological, behavioral, and otherwise phenotypic presentation). Neurodiversity and inclusivity initiatives have drawn attention to the adult autistic population in both clinical application, research, and in the public eye.

One aspect that is emerging in the literature with regard to neurodiversity and ASD is gender and LGBT+ identification. Recent research has shown that individuals with ASD are significantly more likely to identify as LGBT+ [3]. The terms Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (trans) (LGBT) refer to the self-identifications used by individuals to describe their sexual orientation and their gender identity, with the + denoting inclusivity of all other gender and sexual identities. Research focused on ASD, gender identity, and the LGBT+ population is scarce [3], however it is important to understand the experience of ASD and gender identity, as there is significant evidence demonstrating the adversities that both ASD and gender diversity produce. A recent report by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation [4] noted that not only do members of the LGBT+ community experience ongoing barriers, discrimination, and prejudice, but that there is also an increasing number of non-LGBT+ individuals who report feeling uncomfortable in situations in which gender identity is at the forefront, such as learning that a family member is LGBT [4]. Studies have also shown that LGBT+ is linked to discrimination and victimization both at school as well as in the workplace [5,6]. With this understanding, we can also begin to understand the greater risks to the ASD population based on this "double-whammy" effect of both neurodiversity and the higher prevalence of gender diversity.

In a study by Dewinter et al. [7], researchers looked at differences in sexual orientation, gender identity, and romantic relationships in the ASD population. They found that when compared to a neurotypical control group, the ASD group reported a higher rate of same-sex attraction (6.1% of females with ASD reported being attracted to females only, compared to 1.3% in the control group; 5.1% of males with ASD reported being attracted to males only, compared to 3.8% in the control group). Another interesting finding was a significant percentage of the ASD sample indicated no attraction to males or females (4.7% of the male ASD group compared to 1.1% of the male control group; 14.9% of the female ASD group compared to 1.6% of the female control group), suggesting a possible relationship between ASD and asexuality. In addition, past research by Hellman et al. [8] has noted a higher prevalence of homosexual males and bisexual males and females in the ASD population. Higher rates of gender diversity in general have been reported in children with ASD; specifically, Janssen et al. [9] found that 5.4% of children with ASD endorsed the question "wish to be the opposite sex," with an estimated 0.7% of a neurotypical control group endorsement of the same question. Similar findings have been found among ASD adults as well [10]. There has also been a consistent link between ASD and gender dysphoria [11], at consistently higher rates than in the neurotypical population (7.8% incidence of ASD and gender dysphoria compared versus 0.6 to 1% in the control group [12-14].

Despite ASD being the most commonly represented population in behavior analytic research, there are very few studies that explicitly include LGBT+ participants, or studies that target issues specific to this population [3]. There are many reasons for why this may be true. Behavior analytic interventions are more commonly implemented with impaired language and cognition [6], and due to such limitations

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they may be less likely to identify as LGBT+. Nonetheless, there are innumerable articles that include participants with ASD and in-tact cognition, language, and adaptive skills who may have the capacity to identify as LGBT+. Furthermore, it is important for behavior analytic research to continue to strive toward a solid understanding of the gender diverse community, especially in light of harmful research that has been done in the past on conversion therapy [15,16]. Recent research by Capriotti & Donaldson [17] noted a number of actions that ought to be taken in the behavior analytic field to further development in this area, including, but not limited to, issuing practice guidelines for working with gender diverse individuals, as well as researchers publishing literature on gender diversity in behavior analytic journals.

Beyond the aforementioned findings, behavior analysis has been shown to be effective in many public health domains; however, despite these findings, these principles and applications remain under-researched. The purpose of the current review is to identify interventions and research articles that are specific to LGBT+ issues in the ABA literature by way of 1) conduct a brief systematic, scoping review of behavior analytic literature when utilizing LGBT+ search terms; 2) to identify the presence of LGBT+ -related literature; and 3) to identify current gaps in research and utilize this information to make recommendations and planning for subsequent research.

Method

Searches to identify studies for this review were conducted by two separate researchers via the individual journal's website search option in each identified journal rather than a broad database search. This is due to the fact that the outlets listed below are the most likely place purely behavior analytic research would be found. The scope of the search became increasingly broad to appropriately review the available literature and otherwise relevant information with each level. Inclusion and exclusion criteria are listed in each of the level search sections below. No date filters were used and the journals were scoped as of mid December 2021.

Both researchers independently conducted the article scope and compared results until agreement was met on each of the articles. The most prevalent journals in the field, specifically the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis (JABA), Behavior Analysis: Research and Practice* BA:RP) and select ABAI publications including *Behavior Analysis in Practice (BAP)*, and *Behavior and Social Issues (BSI)* were selected for review. No other journals in the field of Applied Behavior Analysis contained articles meeting criteria for this review.

Level 1 Search

Inclusionary criteria in the level 1 search consisted of the term "LGBT" (for each journal). Any studies or articles that were yielded in the results were included. No dates or time frame filters were used. Exclusionary criteria in the level 1 search consisted of studies that were found to be not relevant to any LGBT+ topics or mentioned inclusion of LGBT+ participants. This determination was based on review of the abstract and specific sections (introduction, literature review, results, and discussion) of the paper as necessary.

Level 2 Search

Inclusionary criteria in the level 2 search consisted of the terms "Gay", "Lesbian", "bisexual", and "transgender" (for each of the journals listed above). Exclusionary criteria in the level 2 search included the groups queer, non-binary, and other related groups because it was

thought to be unlikely that this would yield any results based on the limited (due to the datedness of the terminology) and overlapping research yielded by the formerly listed terms. No dates or time frame filters were used in the search. Studies were reviewed and were excluded from further review if they were not relevant to any LGBT+ topics or mentioned inclusion of LGBT+ participants. This determination was based on review of the abstract and specific sections (introduction, literature review, results, and discussion) of the paper as necessary.

Inter-researcher agreement

Both researchers independently conducted the article scope and compared results until agreement was met on each of the articles. 100% agreement was met upon the first review.

Results

Articles for each search term are reported based on search term within each journal, organized by publication type: experimental study, discussion/review/commentary papers, and notes for those that were not included in discussion for further review. For a table of the results by level and journal, please see Table 1. The total number of studies or papers included in the review were twenty five (*N*=25).

	JABA	BA:RP	BP	BSI
Level 1 Total	0	0	0	0
Level 2 Total	12	0	7	5
Gay	10	0	6	3
Lesbian	5	0	0	0
Bisexual	4	0	0	0
Transgender	4	0	1	2

Table 1: Number of articles that met criteria in each journal.

Level 1: LGBT in Behavior Analytic Journals

The search term "LGBT" yielded zero results that were included for further review. JABA, BA:RP, and BAP produced no results when searched. One article appeared in BSI by Mizeal (2021) but did not meet criteria for further review. (WHY?)

Level 2: Individual LGBT search terms

Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis

"Gay" yielded 13 results, 10 of which met criteria for further review. Three of these were experimental studies relevant to LGBT populations and issues. Honnen et al. [18] examined the effects of sign placement to prompt bar patrons at predominantly "gay bars" to take condoms. The signs included information about AIDS risk. They found that patrons taking condoms increased by 47% with the new sign placement. Similarly, Carrigan et al. [19] investigated the effects of condom dispenser location at an outpatient cocaine abuse clinic and found that the intervention resulted in significantly more condoms being taken from the clinic. In more recent research, Hood et al. [20] conducted a descriptive assessment to identify social norms and of their 16 participants, two identified as pansexual, one as bisexual, and one as gay.

Normand et al. [21] conducted a review of behavior analysis in public health research and practice. They noted that Shoptaw et al., [22] implemented the Positive Reinforcement Opportunity Project

(PROP) to reduce methamphetamine use in gay men, bisexual men, transgender women. Conine et al. [15] wrote a review of LGBT+ conversion therapies in ABA and a call for action in which they specifically call for, " continued discussion and review of previously published conversion therapy papers according to present-day guidelines for ethical research, position statements from professional organizations, additional ethics guidelines for behavior-analytic practice, and future behavior-analytic research and practice efforts that support LGBTQ+ people." The remaining discussion articles in the search are in response to Rekers and Lovaas' [16] paper on the treatment of deviant sex role behavior, where the authors reduced feminine behaviors in a young boy. Most recently, Capriotti and Donaldson [17], who agree with others in that Rekers and Lovaas [16] were in fact unethical and go on to state that such papers have not been redacted. Winkler [23] criticized this intervention and suggested that androgynous behavior be targeted as an alternative. Rekers [24] published a reply to Winkler's [23] criticism and indicated that there is no evidence for, nor a "method for translating such evidence into a value judgment to select target responses." Rekers [24] also suggested that there are negative correlates to "rigid femininity" in defense of the study. Finally, the Society for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior [25] also published an Editor's Note regarding the sociality changes concerning Rekers and Lovaas' study. SEAB noted that while the paper and its interventions and rationale remain controversial, there is no evidence to suggest that it was unethical at the time in which it was written. SEAB discusses the evident harms of the paper and makes recommendations for behavior analysts to address these issues. Other important papers [26] were also published in response to Rekers and Lovaas [16] however they were not displayed in the results, likely because they did not include the specific search terms, despite their relevance.

Four papers were excluded from further review and discussion. Meyer's [27] paper on reducing battering of women by men was revealed in the search because gay couples were listed as an exclusionary criterion. Other studies appeared in the search query however review of their abstracts and relevant parts of the paper (e.g. methods) did not yield any relevant information. For example, Nutter et al.'s [28] study to teach institutionalized women, who would now be referred to as intellectually impaired, to select clothing based on popular fashion trends was included in the search results. It is unclear why this study was revealed in the search; however the methods section did not indicate any inquiry specific to LGBT+ issues nor do any of the participants stately identify as LGBT+. Two other studies appeared in the results because a cited authors last name was Gay.

The search term "lesbian" revealed five results in total in JABA, all of which were reported previously. "Bisexual" yielded four search results, three of which were already reviewed. A new study that did emerge by Jarmolowicz et al. [29] examined a preference assessment for sexual partners. They noted that they would present both male and females pictures in the preference assessment if the participant indicated that they were bisexual, however their participants results section did not indicate how many participants identified this way nor was a demographics table for the 41 participants provided. When searching "transgender" four articles were revealed, three of which were already reported. In a new paper that emerged, Jones et al. [1] discusses the reporting of demographic variables in behavior analytic literature and states that from 2013 to 2019, articles in JABA "neither differentiated between the sex and gender of participants, nor reported that any participants identified as transgender or gender nonconforming."

Behavior Analysis: Research in Practice

Gay", "lesbian", "bisexual", and "transgender" all yielded zero results in this journal.

Behavior Analysis in Practice

This journal initially yielded eight items when the journal was searched with no date restriction for "gay", all of which were discussion, conceptual papers, or review papers. Six of them met inclusionary criteria. Leland & Stockwell [30] presented a self-assessment checklist to be able to assess one's own behavior around transgender and gender-nonconforming people in different contexts. The paper highlights the need for such an assessment tool and makes recommendations for its use on various settings to be more Transgender and Gender Nonconforming (TGNC)-affirming. The scale was not validated in this study and no follow -up studies that examine the psychometric properties of the scale were revealed in the search. DeFelice and Diller [31] compare aspects of behavior analysis and intersectional feminism and the parallels between them. Specific to the search terms, this paper was yielded in the search for "gay", as the authors review research relevant to treatments for sexually deviant behaviors [32,33,]. A review by Baires and Koch [34] extend on conversation of feminism in behavior analysis. The authors highlight the issues related to sexism and gender-based discrimination in behavior analysis is a profession. The authors argue that one of the barriers to changing gender discrimination is extinction and punishment, as men who are feminists may be perceived as gay, as cited by Rudman et al. [35] which for many heterosexual men serves as a punisher. They also state that LGBT+ women in behavior analysis may face further discrimination. Szabo [36] notes an overall disparity in our values around equity and diversity and that, in the case of verbal behavior, for example, words or a verbal repertoire can carry meaning based on exposure and learning history (e.g. white, male, straight). The author notes that marginalized groups (e.g., minorities, women, LGBT+) became engaging "transmitters of culture" [36]. Finally, Morris et al. [37] conducted a review similar to the current paper published in Behavior Analysis in Practice. They conducted a search of behavior analyst literature that included 12 studies. Their primary findings centered around papers in the 1970's associated with conversation therapies, as well as more recent discussion papers. Similarities and differences in their review as compared to the current review are discussed later. Three search results were excluded from review as they referred to an author by the name of Gay in their references. "Lesbian" yielded four results, all of which were also displayed in the previous search. "Bisexual" yielded three results, with no new findings and thus not reported. Transgender yielded 8, with seven repeats and with one new discussion paper.

Behavior and Social Issues

The search term "gay" yielded 12 article results, and three met criteria for inclusion. A study by Plumm et al. [38] examined the impact of how certain social policies were framed and the interaction between discounting policies and the participants' religiousness and political party affiliation. Their findings did not support significant differences between gay marriage and same sex marriage when using discounting of gay marriage; covariates of religiousness and part affiliation were significant. Plumm et al. [38] reported that participants who were high in religious intrinsics discounted this outcome more, as did republicans when compared to democrats. Newsome [39] wrote a reply to Plumm et al. [38] in BSI where he reframes some some of the concepts presented in the original paper using relational frame theory, for example.

The author goes on to use the term "queen" to describe that changing stimulus functions that words or verbal behavior may serve, and states that, "political factions are able to co-opt the functions of popular cultural terms by altering the context in which audiences are exposed to them, including the contents and sources of the messages in which these terms are imbedded." Finally, in a paper by Marlott [40], the author suggests that biological factors have little to do with our sexual preferences sexual identities and stresses the important of reinforcing and punishing value of sexual stimulation, for example, as an unconditioned reinforcer. Marlott [40] suggests that we should examine two components - "style of sexual behavior and sexual values (reinforcers and aversive conditions)" and goes on to describe a behavioral model of homophobia.

Nine papers were yielded in the search for "gay" in BSI that were excluded from the scope for further review for several reasons. For example, a paper by Hilton et al. [41] was excluded from further review as a cited authors name had the letters "gay" in it. The paper discusses initiatives toward diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education and behavior analysis but does not address LGBT explicitly. Harman's [42] study on time framing on compliance for social distancing was also excluded from further review. The author mentioned gay marriage as an example when citing Plumm et al. [38] however the paper does not deal with any LGBT issues. Several other papers appeared in the BSI search however when the paper was digitally and manually searched, there were no LGBT relevant terms of topics.

When using the search term "lesbian", six studies were displayed, four of which were already reviewed. The two new studies were not included, however, as they did not explicitly discuss LGBT issues and they were yielded in search due to citations. "Bisexual" did not yield any new studies. "Transgender" yielded two new articles in the search. BSI [43] released a paper called Behaviorists for Social Responsibility Statement on Censorship in Science, stating that the U.S. president and government, as the time of publication, "has employed stimulus control to undermine the values embodied by diversity and by science." One of the terms that was banned from 2018 budget proposal included the word "transgender." An article by Cihon and Mattaini [44] also appeared in the search as it discusses the same issue. In both articles, the research discusses the grave concerns with banning such words at the time, and the impact it bears on social and behavioral science.

Discussion

Findings and importance

The purpose of the current study was to conduct a brief systematic, scoping review of behavior analytic literature when utilizing LGBT+ search terms. Level one of the search did not yield findings in any journals. While this is not surprising, it may be helpful for authors to consider the use of LGBT+ as a keyword for publications when conducting research related to this group so that it may be more easily identified. The second level of the search revealed several papers including discussion and review papers, early papers on sexually deviant behavior, behavior analysis in public health, as well as some, condoms taken in public spaces, among other topics. Despite the emergence of these studies, very few explicitly include or seek to include LGBT populations. This is concerning provided the body of research shown that ABA can be effective for issues that more significantly impact this populations (e.g., STIs), however this is amplified within the content of the extremely high co-occurrence between ASD and LGBT+ identities.

Also concerning in these findings is the lack of reporting of demographics, which has been a problem in ABA research as seen in/reported by Jarmolowicz et al. [29] and further discussed by Jones et al. [1]. Behavior analysts should be careful in future research to more carefully and completely state demographic information when reporting on research samples. Additional problems identified include that most of the research that emerged within this search is very old, considering, and LGBT+ issues seem to have lost momentum since the management of the AIDS epidemic [45]. There are still issues relevant to the LGBT+ community today that ABA is well positioned to support, especially given what is known about ABA and public health. Topics such as adherence to medication for HIV and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PReP) management and educational programs could be developed within an ABA framework. ABA has been useful for drug use and prevention programs as well as many public health initiatives [21]. The LGBT+ community and other marginalized communities are more significantly impacted by STI's, drug use, and chronic health problems, as well as more internalizing and affective problems. More interventions should target LGBT+ populations and support the development of culturally responsive interventions for these populations to address these specific issues.

Importantly, as Capritolli and Donaldson [17], as well as others have noted, articles that have been seen as damaging and in line with therapies that are now banned (e.g. conversation therapies) have been deemed by editorial and academic authorities in our own field ethical for their time. And yet much has arisen in this review that challenges such statements made by LeBlanc [46] and others that these works by Rekers and Lovas [16] are in-fact ethical. Moreover, it calls into question the accountability that we may have carried as a field in perpetuating these practices, and the diversion of responsibility it sets to say that they were ethical "for their time". In a recent announcement from the American Psychological Association [47], the authors released an apology on behalf of the APA for its long-standing role in perpetuating systemic racism. Such an action has set an antecedent condition for researchers to actively consider the role of race, and the role that psychology may have had in racism. The authors would urge the editors to carefully consider such an action may serve so for the behavior analytic community in an effort to help promote and disenfranchise the stigma and systemic barriers around researching LGBT populations. This would also set the stage for a community of behavior analysts to exhibit more compassion and model adjustment in practice and teaching as it relates to developing goals for the LGBT autistic population, for example.

Limitations

Despite the study's many strengths, it needs to be considered within the context of many limitations. In particular, there were limitations in the scope that should prevent this from being an entirely comprehensive review. It is likely that some studies using behavior analytic methods have appeared elsewhere in the literature and were subsequently not yielded in the results. There are many journals that regularly publish single subject, very small N, or otherwise behavior analyst studies that may have included LGBT+ topics. The researchers also did not include terms like "homosexual" that may have yielded more research in older issues before LGBT labels were commonly used. Issues that more commonly impact the LGBT community (e.g. HIV) may have asserted more literature. Search terms that were used at one point in time such as "transexual" rather than transgender may have yielded additional items, however the research did not think this to be likely. Despite these limitations, the researchers believe that the

scope research is in fact an appropriate sample of the frequency of this topic in behavior analytic literature.

Conclusion

Considering the results, the clinical implications of this study are vast, and need to be considered from multiple angles. It is important to recognize why the adversities associated with ASD and gender diversity exist. We are well aware that many persons with general disabilities, including ASD, do not receive adequate or appropriate sexual education, with real limitations in information about sexual orientation and gender diversity [48]. Due to the social impairments associated with the diagnosis of ASD, many autistic people have greater limitations in terms of their access to peers who may act as a resource for both educating and modeling information pertaining to sexuality. Additionally, service providers for persons with disabilities are typically not provided with education and training in understanding the sexual development and needs of individuals with disabilities [49,50]. These lack of experiences and resources yield a situation in which persons with disabilities simply have fewer opportunities to explore their own gender identity and sexuality [51]. With this knowledge, as well as the understanding that LGBT+ issues are underrepresented in the behavior analytic research, it is reasonable to conclude that the need for further studies in this area, as well as public outreach for the aforementioned issues within the ABA community is dire, as is the need for the behavior analytic community to denounced previous harmful practices as unethical. To close, the current review has yielded several important findings and, in particular, it produced an overview of an important academic discussion. Having been allowed to see the trajectory of papers that have contributed to this discussion, it is clear that there is much structural work to do to support the LGBT community and in particular the neurodivergent and LGBT community, which society has been findings to become increasingly vulnerable.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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