COMMENTS ON SIDMAN’S REMARKS SERIES

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As a graduate student working in Murray Sidman’s group at the Shriver Center when his Remarks series came out, I recall clearly reading each one as it appeared and discussing the series with my advisor, Larry Stoddard. I recall just as clearly my questions, then unstated, about why Murray was spending his valuable time on these little essays. They were always written thoughtfully and well, of course, because he has always written thoughtfully and well; his 2010 Remarks column demonstrates that his ability has not changed over the years. That acknowledged, I recall my puzzlement back then because so many of the points he made in this series were so obviously right that I thought that any competent behavioral scientist—certainly any behavior analyst—would surely agree with him. Indeed, over the years I have often cited the material in the Remarks columns in the course of explaining to cognitivists, developmentalists, and neuroscientists that behavior analysts are interested in topics relating to “cognition” (i.e., stimulus control development, relational learning, etc., Sidman, 1978, 1979), “representation” (i.e., stimulus control topography, Sidman, 1979), and other core interests of their disciplines. Often, I have seemed to succeed in communicating with such colleagues by adopting and adapting Murray’s approach.

I recall also being puzzled by aspects of Murray’s tone in the Remarks series. I found it somehow simultaneously humble and open but also clearly assertive and even a bit “edgy” in places (e.g., 1976, 1977b, 1981). I was used to a certain amount of edge when Murray wrote for general audiences about broad issues of scientific or practical importance. In a chapter on the measurement of behavioral development (Sidman, 1986), for example, he noted a curious characteristic of psychologists as compared to other scientists, writing “Other sciences build upon what is known. In psychology, if what is known does not account for all behavior, it seems to be the practice to ignore or even tear down the structure of existing knowledge.” As a graduate student in Boston during the height of the so-called cognitive revolution, I had no trouble understanding that little jewel. But why the seeming edginess in what appeared to be straightforward discussions of fairly basic

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topics aimed at Behaviorism readers, most of whom were presumably behavior analysts or those who respected the discipline?

It is almost 30 years since the last of the Remarks series appeared, and I have been fortunate subsequently to have had a career that exposed me to a broad range of behavioral and biobehavioral science, scientists, and contingencies of academic life. I have a little “theory” now about why Murray put his time and energy into the Remarks. Over the past three decades I have learned to appreciate that there is much variability in fundamental concepts, terminology, objectives, values, and other basics of style and practice among members of even narrowly defined disciplines such as behavior analysis. Perhaps Murray was concerned back then with similar variability that he must have observed. I speculate that he may have thought that some of this was not in the best interests of behavior analysis as a scientific discipline working toward maturity. I think that his Remarks series was part of a larger effort to guide behavior analysts towards that long-term goal.

Whether or not my little theory about the Remarks is correct, Murray’s career has been defined by continuing contributions aimed at helping behavior analysis mature as a discipline. Everyone knows about Tactics (1960), of course, but I think that few appreciate that he helped to define the field of translational behavior analysis (McIlvane, 2009) decades before translational research became an acknowledged target of science at the highest policy levels in the U.S. and elsewhere. As another example, his elegant efforts to resolve the “naming” vs. “basic process” issue in accounts of equivalence class formation (Sidman, 2000; cf. Horne & Lowe, 1996) exemplified respectful incorporation of colleagues’ positions into his own analysis. His (1977b) Remarks column and Coercion and Its Fallout (2001) were clearly aimed at discouraging use of aversive procedures by some behavior analysts—practices that have drawn international attention from the United Nations and international human rights organizations (cf. Ahern, 2010).

Returning to the questions I asked myself as a graduate student, why did the Remarks columns focus on seemingly basic conceptual and procedural issues and why was there sometimes edginess (my opinion) in the writing? I speculate that Murray was then experiencing some of the same concerns and frustrations that I am now, specifically that behavior analysis seems to be losing the coherence imposed by a broadly agreed-upon set of core procedures, principles, and practices that help to define a scientific discipline. I am not concerned with behavioral variability among behavior analysts per se. As in the behavioral repertoire of individuals, behavioral variability offers the possibility for selecting effective behaviors and de-selecting ineffective ones. Rather, I am concerned that we are losing broad agreement as to how we go forward in defining the problems to be answered, the methods by which they are answered, and, indeed, the criteria by which we evaluate whether a given problem has been posed and/or answered adequately. Judging by his commentary in this volume, I think that Murray shares these concerns, and he offers a characteristically positive suggestion as to how we might make progress going forward.

Although I could cite a number of examples to illustrate my concerns, I will focus on two that Murray addressed in the Remarks series. The first concerns the
general area of measuring the stimuli to which a research participant attends in discrimination learning procedures such as matching to sample (called elsewhere the analysis of stimulus control topographies; McIlvane & Dube, 1992). Many investigators of equivalence class formation and other aspects of simple and conditional discrimination learning seem to pay little or no attention to the stimulus control measurement issues that Murray considered in the Remarks and in many of his subsequent contributions. I have trouble understanding why controlling (or at least considering) such sources of behavioral variability is not standard practice in behavioral research laboratories. The second concerns the status of research on basic discrimination learning processes as a research topic/issue in current behavior analytic research. With a few noteworthy exceptions, it has none—as if all of the relevant conceptual and methodological issues had been answered long ago. They have not. As just one example of a concern I think I may share with Murray, studies of potentially errorless learning have been all but abandoned by behavior analysts despite their potential theoretical contributions and practical importance for instructional programming. Do behavior analysts not see the potential here—especially in the age of computer technology that could render long-standing questions more answerable than they were when most of the extant literature on errorless learning was published? Recalling Murray’s (1977a) Remarks, perhaps everyone already knows this or perhaps I am obviously wrong in my thinking.

Whatever the answers to the questions that I have posed here may be, I think that high-profile communications of the type exemplified by the Remarks columns and this effort to call attention to them are worthwhile activities for behavior analysts. We tend to avoid talking to each other in this informal way in broadly available outlets, and I think that there should be more opportunities to do so going forward. I think our students will benefit and so will their teachers.

References


Sidman, M. (2010, this volume). Remarks on research tactics and philosophy of science.