

# On Terms: Maladaptive Behavior

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## Abstract

There is no shortage of terms that are used to describe and articulate the strategies, practices, and underpinnings associated with the work engaged in by behavior analysis. Two terms that a clinic-focused behavior analyst may hear often are maladaptive behavior and problem behavior. These terms are not only common within our everyday practice, but they are also peppered throughout behavioral literature. Despite their permanency in the behavior analyst's repertoire, their meanings remain inconsistent, interchangeable, and conceptually unclear. For over a century, this lack of precision has gone unchecked, despite extensive research on undesirable or clinically significant behaviors. This article offers individuals a recount of the history, definitional limitations, and functional implications of these terms. From the perspective of early psychological scholarship and contemporary behavior-analytic sources, I argue that the field of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) will benefit from distinguishing maladaptive behavior as the presence of behavior that adversely affects the individual, while problem behavior should refer to the absence or inhibition of adaptive responses in relation to others' social behaviors. Furthermore, I propose that both terms be used to describe the effects on the person engaging in the behavior, instead of others around the individual, as a method of improving directionality and functional clarity. As a field focused on verbal behavior, becoming more conceptually precise with our own verbal behavior will lead to a more coherent basis for interpreting and treating behaviors that interfere with individuals' adaptation and well-being.

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## Introduction

There is no shortage of literature in the behavioral journals related to undesired behaviors [1,2,3,4]. With so much research on the subject, one may conceive that the subject is clear. However, this could not be further from the truth. The lack of clarity is because the behavioral field has yet to solidify the term maladaptive behavior.

## Historical Usage of The Terms

The contemporary term problem behavior can be most notably traced back to the article written by Whitley (1929). In this article, The Observation of the Problem Boy, Whitley described the relationship between the individual and their behavior, suggesting that problem behavior arises as a function of the situations in which the individual may find themselves. Furthermore, Whitley goes on to suggest that practitioners use detailed descriptions of the situational contexts that

children are attempting to adjust to as a signature part of the development of behavioral diagnoses. By his account, problem behavior is both situational and descriptive of the state in which the individual finds themselves.

The term maladaptive behavior has a relatively long history in psychology. One of the earlier presentations of the term can be found in an article by Hamilton (1927). In an article titled *Comparative Psychology and Psychopathology*, Hamilton attempted to convey to readers the importance of using the behaviors of animals to understand human psychopathology [5]. With almost one hundred years of history, there is no wonder the term has been used thousands of times in literary works. A few years after Hamilton's article, its usage was significantly increased [6,7,8,9]. The term seemed to fall out of vogue until its resurgence in the 1970s [2, 10, 3, 11]. In each occurrence, the term maladaptive behavior was used with implied contextual directionality.

#### *Problems with Current Definitions*

According to the Autism Encyclopedia, maladaptive behavior is "behavior that interferes with an individual's activities of daily living or ability to adjust to and participate in particular settings" [12] (p. 1796). This definition has a few issues. Firstly, it fails to identify directionality. Specifically, it does not address whether the behavior affects the exhibitor's behavior or that of others in their environment. An article by Anestis (2007) used the term maladaptive behavior to define behaviors that have less of a benefit for the individual who engages in the behavior. While the directionality is more concisely oriented to the individual's benefits, from this perspective, the aggressive behavior that consistently leads to rewards being given may be less maladaptive than asking for items if asking leads to fewer rewards. According to Morse (2011), maladaptive behaviors adversely impact an individual's ability to adapt to everyday situations. By Morse's definition, behaviors are viewed as maladaptive due to interaction with the environment rather than one's own personal gain. Using the previously given example, the aggressive behaviors of an individual would be defined as maladaptive based on how others in the environment view or accept the behavior. Stated another way, the family that lives with an aggressive child but ignores the behavior and provides no punishments or reprimands would signal that the behavior is not maladaptive. As we use the term "maladaptive," it is critical that we clearly understand if we are discussing behavior that affects our clients or others in their environment.

A second and more significant issue with the definition of maladaptive behavior, described by Gray (2013), is that it lists problem behavior as synonymous with maladaptive behavior. Phrases such as problem behavior [7], problem tendencies [1], and challenging behavior [13] are used in the literature to refer to maladaptive behavior. The issue with the term "problem behavior" is that it, too, fails to identify who the problem behavior affects. This interchange is consistent in behavioral textbooks (Mazur, 2015) [7, 14] and must be addressed.

#### *Distinguishing Maladaptive From Problem Behavior*

A few researchers have attempted to understand problem behavior better. In their evaluation of the work done by B.F. Skinner, Axe, Phelan, and Irwin (2019) discuss how Skinner's definition of a problem behavior held that there was no behavior available to the individual to control deprivation or allow them to escape an aversive situation (p. 39). Like many concepts, Skinner provides a solid foundation to view problem behavior. From the views of Skinner and Whitley, we can view problem behavior as the absence of behavior and maladaptive behavior as the exhibition of behavior.

#### *Proposed Terminological Framework*

To provide future clarity for readers and increase the use of precise behavior analytic terminology,

three changes must occur in the space of undesired behaviors. The first is to apply the term maladaptive behavior to reflect the exhibition of behaviors. Secondly, problem behavior should be used to reflect behavior voids or inhibitions. Also, to address the issue of directionality, both terms should only be used to represent the effects on the exhibitor. We must always consider how the behavior is affecting the exhibitor. This perspective is consistent with how many behavior analysts view the need to determine the function of a behavior. Regardless of how the behavior looks (topography), the critical question is what the individual gains from engaging in the behavior (i.e., the function). We must take that same view: how does the individual's maladaptive or problem behavior affect them within their environment?

In summary, the terms *maladaptive behavior* and *problem behavior* have been used for nearly a century, yet their meanings remain inconsistent across literature, practice, and training. As shown in the historical and contemporary sources reviewed, both terms developed in response to efforts to describe undesired actions, but each progressed along its own conceptual pathway. Over time, the lack of agreement about directionality, function, and impact has made it increasingly difficult for practitioners to rely on these terms with precision. As a result, behaviors that are conceptually distinct continue to be grouped together and applied interchangeably, which ultimately reduces the clarity of clinical descriptions and weakens the alignment between terminology and behavioral function.

### Conclusion

By distinguishing maladaptive behavior as the *exhibition* of behavior that interferes with the individual's adaptation, and problem behavior as the *absence* or *inhibition* of behavior needed to contact reinforcement or escape aversive conditions, we can begin to restore conceptual accuracy within our language. Moreover, by reserving both terms for describing the effects on the *exhibiting individual*, behavior analysts can avoid the long-standing ambiguity created when behavioral labels are determined by the reactions of observers rather than the individual's interaction with their environment. These clarifications are consistent with the broader principles of behavior analysis, which require that terms be tied to observable relations, functional effects, and the contingencies that shape and maintain behavior.

Moving forward, adopting a more precise terminology will not only improve communication among practitioners and researchers, but will also support more accurate functional assessments and intervention planning. As the field continues to grow and refine its conceptual foundations, ensuring that commonly used terms reflect clear, functional distinctions is essential. By doing so, behavior analysts can enhance the consistency, interpretability, and usefulness of the terminology that guides both scientific understanding and clinical practice.

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