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Remembering Vic Laties (February 2, 1926 - February 3, 2020)

A. Charles Catania

University of Maryland, Baltimore County



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Address correspondence to:

A. Charles Catania, 10545 Rivulet Row, Columbia, MD 21044 USA

Email: catania@umbc.edu

Abstract

Victor G. Laties encountered pharmacology before engaging with the science of behavior. Interrupting undergraduate work at Tufts for service in the navy, he became a pharmacist's mate during the 1940s. He met Bernard Weiss while they were graduate students at the University of Rochester. Then, while Vic was teaching at Brown, Ogden Lindsley demonstrated the power of operant contingencies to him at a chance meeting. Vic later moved to Johns Hopkins and was soon joined by Bernie. Their collaborative work in pharmacology and behavior continued after both returned to the University of Rochester. At the medical school Bernie expanded his research in behavioral toxicology as Vic devoted more of his time to editorial activities and to the Society for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior, eventually serving for more than half a century as Executive Editor of its journals. This account describes some of that service and some aspects of Vic's later years, during which he remained active in retirement as well as he could while he and his wife Marty coped with his progressive symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. Though his remembering gradually faded, he completed a memoir and continued a rich and memorable life with family and friends.

End of Abstract

196 words

Victor G. Laties was born to Simon Laties and Rima Kapnik in Wisconsin on February 2, 1926. His parents were Russian Jews who left Russia soon after the Bolshevik Revolution. In a memoir that described his family history, his early years and the arc of his career (Laties, 2017), Vic told of a happy childhood, the interruption of his undergraduate studies at Tufts University by a stint as a pharmacist's mate in the navy during the 1940s, his subsequent career working with his colleague, Bernie Weiss, at the University of Rochester and then at Johns Hopkins University, and his long-term commitments to the Society for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior (SEAB) and its journals, the Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior (JEAB) and the Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis (JABA). Toward the end of his career, he moved with his wife Marty (more formally, Martha) to an apartment in a retirement community in Bowie, Maryland. Even before the move, his professional functioning had deteriorated with the progressive development of Alzheimer's disease. He was eventually transferred to the memory unit. He died on February 3, 2020, not long after a stroke.

About a week later, an informal memorial was held at the Laties' apartment. It was attended by family and friends. I'd met Vic and Marty's son Andy some years earlier and there for the first time I also met their two daughters, Claire and Nancy, and most of the grandchildren. I suspected I might be asked to write a memorial paper for Vic and I wanted to include stories about how he and Marty came to deal with the gradual loss of Vic's memory, especially because what they did made so much behavioral sense. But I was reluctant to do so without the permission of the family. Marty in particular urged me to go ahead, in part because Alzheimer's is a disease too often stigmatized. With no hesitation, the family unanimously agreed that it would be appropriate to include the stories.

The person who should have written an appreciation of Vic's life and his contributions to this journal and our discipline was Bernie Weiss. Vic and Bernie first met when they were both graduate students at the University of Rochester and had been colleagues for perhaps a decade longer than had I. For most of that time they were together at the same institution, either Johns Hopkins University or the University of Rochester. Bernie had retired just before Vic and Marty's move to Maryland. But Bernie died in 2018 (Newland, 2018), at a time when Vic wouldn't have been up to the task of writing an obituary about his colleague. Fortunately, Bernie provided us with a memoir of sorts (Weiss, 2009), in which he described his childhood in Brooklyn, his service as a member of a B-24 crew in the Pacific during World War II, and memorable stories about events during his remarkable career.

In his own memoir (Laties, 2017, p. 539), Vic included this acknowledgment of Bernie:

I have congenially worked for many years with my dear friend and colleague, Bernie Weiss. We published so much together that when his name is mentioned mine often comes up, and vice versa (e.g., Laties, Weiss, Clark, & Reynolds, 1965; Weiss & Laties, 1961, 1969). But I come first only alphabetically. In our work together, first at Johns Hopkins and later in Rochester, Bernie was typically the initiator and innovator. We eventually diverged in our focuses, as he continued research and I became more heavily involved in the Society for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior (SEAB) and its journals.

Bernie and Vic were members of that special group of founders of our discipline who got there via routes other than through the direct mentorships of Skinner and Keller and Schoenfeld. Vic had been strongly influenced by Og Lindsley, who helped him to see how easy it was to shape the behavior of someone they met on a train. Having begun in

pharmacology with Louis Lasagna at Johns Hopkins, they soon found commonalities with the work of Peter Dews (Morse, 2017). By the time I was getting started in behavior analysis their work on thermoregulation (Weiss & Laties, 1961) forced me to rethink the distinction between positive and negative reinforcement not in terms of presenting or removing stimuli (heat or cold) but in terms of behavior that might compete with the response to be reinforced (e.g., shivering produced by cold), and the Laties et al. (1965) paper on the relations between a rat's stereotyped tail biting and its lever pressing during a spaced-responding schedule introduced me to the complexity of mediational accounts of behavior. Vic and Bernie have provided their own accounts of their work (Laties, 2017; Weiss, 2009), which is well represented not only in our journals but also in their seminal contributions to psychopharmacology and behavioral toxicology.



Vic Laties, Bernie Weiss and Peter Dews

In 1966, SEAB was looking for an Executive Editor for JEAB to succeed Nate Azrin, who was nearing the end of his term (Catania, 1987; Laties, 1987a). John Boren, serving on what would now be called a search committee, had separately asked both Vic and me if we'd be willing to be nominated for the position. As we discovered long after, several others had already declined. He and I waited and chatted outside the SEAB meeting room, where we were eventually informed that I'd been elected the next JEAB editor.

During the term of JEAB's first editor, Charlie Ferster, major concerns were publishing the journal, funding it and dealing with other administrative issues. Getting manuscripts for the new journal was a higher priority than reviewing and editing them after their submission. For these reasons, the title was Executive Editor rather than simply Editor. Journal practices evolved over John Boren's following term, and by the end of Nate Azrin's term the business end of the journal had settled down while the handling of increasing numbers of manuscripts had become a more rigorous and substantial job. I hadn't realized that Vic had expressed interest in the publishing and business side of the journal while I'd been mainly concerned with the editorial side.

While we stood around talking after the SEAB meeting, Peter Dews suggested that the Executive Editor position could be divided into Executive Editor and Editor (perhaps that was why there were two nominees). As I later wrote:

I then made what was undoubtedly the single most important decision of my editorial tenure and appointed Vic Laties as Executive Editor. I retained responsibility for editorial decisions, and Vic took on the multitudinous problems of journal publication. I have never had cause to regret the decision: Vic's continued dedication to JEAB and later also to JABA has been essential to the continued vitality of both journals, and we are all in his debt" (Catania, 1987, p. 482).



Vic Laties, Charlie Catania and John Boren

Vic remained Executive Editor through the founding of JABA, which began publishing in 1968, and beyond the end of my JEAB term, eventually taking over as Editor for the 1973-1976 term and therefore serving for a while in both capacities. He continued past his retirement from the University of Rochester and never formally retired his SEAB position. The masthead now lists him as "Executive Editor, 1966-2020," but his term probably ended functionally about when he attended his last meeting of the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI) in 2016. That was fitting, because by that time he had diligently served our field for half a century.

Among Vic's many contributions: he researched SEAB's financial options and in consultation with others on the Board put the organization on a firm financial footing; he spearheaded the arrangements that made the articles across several decades of both journals freely available via PubMed Central; he reviewed data on the effects of subscription rates on both individual and library subscribers; he championed the preservation of our journals by ensuring that they were printed on archival paper; and as we moved from print to web he set up a SEAB website and reported on citation data and other information.

After its business meetings, SEAB had established a tradition of holding a dinner for its members, who consisted mainly of past and present editors and associate editors of the journals. Vic typically participated in giving informal awards. In the days of JEAB's green and gray cover design, an outgoing editor or associate editor could expect to receive a pair of socks, one green and one gray (he'd usually slip the recipient an identical second pair toward the end of the dinner). Later he became more creative with t-shirts or other themed mementos and new colors appropriate to JABA's cover design. On occasion, Phil Himeline sang a familiar song for which I had written new lyrics in recognition of some deserving SEAB member. One for Vic appears in Appendix 1.

Throughout those years Vic didn't lose sight of editorial issues, as when, across a range of journal editors, he contributed to the use of blank left pages of articles for the reprinting of quotations of behavioral interest. Many of them were reprinted in a volume of JEAB book reviews (Catania & Himeline, 1996). Phil Himeline and I, its editors, wanted to list Vic as a co-editor for that reason and because Vic too had served as a book review editor and had also participated in other ways. But he adamantly refused to be included.

Vic was ever alert to important moments in behavior analysis and usually attended professional meetings with his camera. He wasn't our official historian but he probably should have been. He documented the histories of SEAB (Laties, 1987b), JEAB (Himeline & Laties, 1987; Laties, 2008) and JABA (Laties & Mace, 1993), and also of behavioral pharmacology (Laties, 1986). In honor of his contributions, the SEAB Board of Directors created an award in his name. At the May 2008 SEAB meeting Vic was its first recipient. The JABA announcement of the award is reproduced at the end of this paper.

At some point one of us was asked by the B. F. Skinner Foundation to write an introduction to Skinner's collection of papers, the book "Cumulative Record" (Skinner, 1959, 1961, 1972). Given our common interests in history, it seemed natural for us to work on the project together. We discovered that each of the three existing editions included some material that didn't appear in any of the others and we ended up producing an amalgamated new version called "The Definitive Edition" (Laties & Catania, 1999; Skinner, 1999a). That project later inspired a paper about Skinner's use of quotations (Catania & Laties, 2003).

We also had the privilege of introducing a paper by Skinner (1966) on Pavlov (Catania & Laties, 1999b) in a special issue of the *Russian Journal of Psychology* dedicated to Pavlov's sesquicentennial. Both we and Skinner were translated into Russian for the issue and our names, titles and affiliations were translated from the Russian back into English on the title pages (Vic became *Victor J. Leytis*); the original English versions of both papers were concurrently published in JEAB (Catania & Laties, 1999a; Skinner, 1999b).

My wife Connie (Constance) and I have lived since 1973 in Columbia, MD. Because Connie's brother, Larry (Laurence Britt), lived with his wife Gen (Genevieve) in Rochester, NY, we drove up to visit once or twice a year. Probably in the 1990s I thought it would be good to work in some time with Vic. When I told Larry I wanted to call Vic Laties, Larry replied "You know Vic?" He and Gen already knew Vic and Marty. Both had been active in local activities such as ACLU meetings and they lived just a few minutes apart. From then on the six of us usually got together whenever Connie and I visited Rochester.



Larry & Gen Britt, Marty & Vic Laties, and Charlie & Connie Catania

At the Medical School Vic and I often joined Bernie and other colleagues for lunch. Once Connie and I met with Vic and Marty at their home while Larry and Gen were otherwise occupied. The conversation turned to their retirement plans. They had been dealing with the Alzheimer's symptoms of Vic's mother and were concerned about whether they'd be able to handle things if Vic had a similar predisposition. The concern was well founded, because it did later manifest itself.



Vic Laties, Murray Sidman and Joe Brady

Vic and I continued our joint interest in historical issues. In 2008 we participated in a conference at the University of North Texas on the history of behavior analysis, also attended by Murray Sidman, Joe Brady and Jim Holland. Later Vic and I began planning a book that would cover the history of behavior analysis in broad outlines in the context of other world events. One key element was that instead of tracking proliferating behavioral laws and theories we would emphasize the explosive expansion of applications. We needed more time working together. In November 2012 I flew up to Rochester so we could concentrate on the book. Marty was concerned about Vic's driving, and, foreshadowing what was to come, when Vic drove me to the airport for my return flight he had trouble with a route he'd traveled many times.

We didn't make much progress in the next few years. I was busy with other projects, and Vic and Marty began downsizing and preparing to sell their house in anticipation of their move to a retirement community in Maryland near their daughter Nancy. Bernie's retirement was also imminent, but he was staying in the Rochester area. Vic and I planned to get back to work more intensively after the move. I visited their apartment every few weeks, helping Vic to sort professional materials and looking through his substantial picture archive as we sought good candidates for the history book. If I showed him a photo from the 1960s, he could usually name everyone in it.

Vic's bookshelves held art and literature and history along with his professional collection. At times he'd go to the shelves to fetch a book by Skinner only to pull out an art book next to it in which he was soon engrossed. Marty was adept at handling such lapses. He was never criticized and she made sure that others treated him the same way. He was genial as always and their home was a happy place.

A while after Vic's move I had occasion to call Bernie. After we'd finishing discussing some business, Bernie surprised me by saying that he was really pissed with Vic. I asked him why and Bernie said that Vic had been invited but hadn't come to his retirement party. The party was scheduled for a time not long before Vic and Marty's move and I imagined the invitation getting misplaced and forgotten during the downsizing and packing. Given when I had learned about it, I'd assumed Bernie knew about Vic's Alzheimer's condition, but I soon realized I was wrong. After I told him, Bernie paused for a long while and then began describing various signs, such as Vic easily losing the thread of lunchtime conversations. Vic and Bernie saw each other often, but Vic hadn't talked about what was happening and the onset was so gradual that Bernie hadn't noticed. One irony is that Bernie's recent toxicology work had begun to look at environmental influences on Alzheimer's disease.

The May 2016 ABAI meeting was scheduled for Chicago, and Vic very much wanted to attend. So Vic wouldn't have to travel alone, we flew out together from and later returned together to BWI airport. Marty had prepared Vic for the trip with notes about things he needed to remember which Vic kept in various pockets, but we arrived at the meeting hotel to discover he had no credit cards with him. He was kept out of trouble with the help of several colleagues --- at one point we had to dissuade him from taking a walking tour by himself to some Chicago art museums --- and I learned some valuable lessons about the art of managing someone with Alzheimer symptoms.



Vic Laties, Peter Killeen and Celia Gershenson at ABAI 2016

Vic enjoyed his meeting and the rest of us enjoyed his company. A reception in his honor was held one evening; a highlight once again was Phil Himeline singing for Vic (my lyrics appear in Appendices 2 and 3). But perhaps more important, while Vic and I were having a buffet breakfast at the hotel restaurant one morning I realized I had Bernie's home number and I called from my cell phone. I asked Bernie if he'd like to talk to Vic and then handed Vic the phone. Things started awkwardly, but soon I heard Vic chatting about wanting to get back up to Rochester for a visit. The old friends talked for a while and ended their conversation congenially; it was to be their last.

Our return to Maryland was uneventful, but it had become obvious that Vic could no longer participate in the history book. I didn't feel I could write it on my own and fortunately I was able to recruit Nancy Neef into the project. She will bring her JABA expertise, but no matter the direction we take Vic will remain our co-author (Catania, Neef, & Laties, in preparation).

One more opportunity for a V. G. Laties publication remained, however. The Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies had extended new invitations to its memoirs project (Holdsambeck & Pennypacker, 2017) and among the papers I'd helped Vic sort out was the incomplete draft of a memoir. I visited Vic and Marty and recorded an oral history of events that hadn't been included in Vic's draft. He recounted some easily but had trouble with others; Marty's contributions were invaluable because she'd heard Vic tell his stories many times. By the time the interview was transcribed and integrated with the existing text, we had a manuscript suitable for publication (Laties, 2017).

Even as his remembering deteriorated Vic found joy all around him: his family, the changing colors of fall leaves, a favorite jazz piece, an art print, his colleagues, photography, maps of London from different eras, and scholarly esoterica that revealed unusual facets of the history of psychopharmacology. Marty was indispensable in creating an environment that made all that possible for Vic (she also knew a bit about shaping). I came away from my visits with them happy to have been there. Marty and Vic taught me that even amidst the losses created by Alzheimer's, a fulfilling life is possible. Definitions of *memorable* feature not only the sense of being easy to remember, but also that of being remarkable and therefore worthy of being remembered. In both these senses Vic was indeed memorable.

The 2008 JABA announcement of Vic's Lifetime Award (Volume 41, p. 332)

THE FIRST VICTOR G. LATIES AWARD



Victor G. Laties (Photo by Brian Iwata)

On March 5, 2008, the following motion was passed unanimously by the SEAB Board of Directors: SEAB will create an award in Vic Laties' honor, entitled "The Victor G. Laties Award for Lifetime Service to the Society for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior." This award will be given as SEAB considers individuals to be deserving of this honor and will require a two-thirds majority to pass. Victor G. Laties will be the first recipient of this award in Chicago, May 2008.

Vic Laties received this award along with a plaque with the following inscription:

*The Society for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior
Presents to*

Victor G. Laties

*The Victor G. Laties Award for Lifetime Service to the
Society for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*

In Recognition of Years of Extraordinary
Leadership and Service to the Society

"Nature cannot be ordered about, except by obeying her."
Francis Bacon, 1620

Chicago, Illinois
May 2008

Appendix 1: Lyrics to the tune of Simon and Garfunkel's "Sounds of Silence"

Victor Laties, our old friend,
We've come to honor you again
Because you've given us your vision
For our Society decisions
And the vision that you planted and sustained
 Still remains
Preserved in PubMed Central

So PubMed Central's now a home
For all the creatures that you've known,
Like the rat beneath the heat lamp
That pressed a lever in the cold and damp
When its eyes were bathed
 in the glow of a warming light
It felt so right
To be in PubMed Central....

Where online everyday you saw
Ten thousand hits and maybe more.
People searching and exploring
People surfing and downloading
Writing research up they never thought they'd share
 But now they're there
Preserved in PubMed Central.

"Friends," you said, "You do not know
Just how fast a website grows.
Log on now that I might teach you,"
And the timing rat that reached you
Bit its tail like it was DRL
 And waited
Within PubMed Central.

And our colleagues still parade
To the website that you made,
For behavior's still performing
Its environmental warnings.
And we see that the words of our journals
 have traveled farther than we thought;
They're eagerly sought.
You put them into PubMed Central.

Appendix 2: To the tune of "Dulcinea" from the musical, *Man of La Mancha*

You've served SEAB so long
With your name on our mastheads
Our journals have prospered and grown.
You've kept SEAB so strong.
You have always been with us,
Have always done more than your part.

Victor Laties... Victor Laties...
All our journals sing in praise of Victor Laties
And besides you look a lot like
B. F. Skinner
(Maybe thinner?...) Somewhat thinner...

Search the web and we see
Rats that warmed themselves up,
Or that timed things by biting their tails.
You wrote our history
And did research on drugs
And on toxins we breathe in our air.

Victor Laties... Victor Laties...
Here we praise thee, laud thee,
Cheer thee, Victor Laties!

Now together
We're all sharing in your story,
Victor Laties... Victor Laties!

Appendix 3: To the tune of "The Impossible Dream" from the musical, *Man of La Mancha*

To dream a Utopian dream
To give evolution its due
To search for an operant answer
To see what contingencies do

To think in behavioral terms
To sow an applied point of view
To show that all verbal behavior
Is shaped by environments too!

This is our quest, to follow our star
Our growing momentum shall carry us far,
We'll work our way through any ratio pause
And endeavor to show how the mind
 heeds behavioral laws.

Oh we know we have far more to learn
 in our marvelous quest
But we'll harvest an ample return
 as we work out the rest.

And the world will be better for this
That our field, faced by dogma and doubt,
Gained strength as it grew variations
For ours is a reachable star!

(Repeat the last three stanzas)

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