NO MATTER HOW ODD IT IS, IT IS NOT ODD AT ALL

A Response to “Exposition in existential terms of a case of “Negative Schizophrenia” approached by means of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy”

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ABSTRACT

Behavior analysis is a contextualistic approach, open to the analysis of all forms of human experience and more allied with existential psychology than is typically appreciated. What has hidden this fact is the mistakes made by behavior analysts in the analysis of human language and cognition. With that error corrected, what would otherwise seem odd can be seen to be normal.

The target article presents in some detail how Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT: Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) can be applied to a case of negative schizophrenia. ACT has been shown in controlled trials to be helpful in coping with the positive symptoms of schizophrenia (Bach & Hayes, 2002; Guadiano & Herbert, in press). This is the first description of its application to the negative signs and symptoms of psychosis.

For readers of this journal, what might be surprising is that a treatment based on behavior analysis has such a significant overlap with existential and experiential therapy. The authors of the target article rightly cite well-known radical behavioral authors who long ago worked through these connections (e.g., Day, 1969), but it is still not uncommon to hear behavior analysis being framed as a direct opponent of existential and experiential therapy. The purpose of my comments thus is to provide a context for the target article, and to suggest that the target article is not an aberration, but instead is a logical extension of contemporary behavior analytic thinking.

Behavior Analytic Psychology

Outside of the area, behavior analysis is usually viewed as a mechanistic approach. According to the traditional narrative, behavior analysts believe that complex actions are built from the ground up by collections of discrete stimuli and discrete responses, bound together by associations or by reinforcement contingencies. Often the claim is made that thoughts and feelings are not included in behavioral accounts, particularly when these accounts are “radical behavioral” (i.e., behavior analytic). Usually, such narratives include the claim that this view is now dead, passé, or falling from favor, and has been replaced by something else. What the “something else” may be depends on the persuasive task of the authors of the particular narrative.
From the point of view of behavior analysis almost nothing in the traditional narrative seems correct. Behavior analysis is a larger field than it has ever been. Few behavior analysts would deny the importance of thoughts and feelings. A robust experimental psychology of cognition is emerging within behavior analysis right now. While it is true that there are very mechanistic behavior analysts, many if not most contemporary behavior analysts are contextualists. And, and long last, clinical behavior analytic procedures such as ACT are emerging that should make all of this evident even to the most skeptical outsider.

Let’s begin with the importance of human thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and the like in behavior analysis. Behavior analysis is in part a rebellion against traditional behavioral restrictions against considering these aspects of human experience. In the first place Skinner used the term “radical behaviorism” (Skinner, 1945) he argued that a behavioral analysis of the behavior of scientists themselves was necessary. Such an analysis, he argued, made it clear that scientific “objectivity” depended not on the target or location of analyzed events but on the nature of the personal history controlling observations of them. Human knowledge was historically and social situated, he argued, and it was the details of that history that determined whether observations were scientifically valid. Scientifically unacceptable subjectivity could occur in the analysis of publicly observed and agreed upon events if social or personal contexts that interfered with effective commerce with the world were shared among a group. For example, a group of teenagers could all agree that they had seen a rock star who was performing in town that evening pass by in a car, not because the face seen truly looked like the star, but because all of them were highly motivated to see their favorite singer. Public agreement in this case was hardly a guide to accurate observations. Conversely, a single person could notice a thought or feeling with “objectivity” if their social history of observation and reporting had established reporting under the control of events seen.

This argument constituted a fundamental break with the Watsonian tradition, which up until that time was the core of “behaviorism.” Skinner openly rejected Watson’s restrictions (e.g., against introspection), but did so in a very clever way. Properly understood, “radical behaviorism” is an ironic label (not an extreme one) because traditional behavioral prohibitions against looking within were exploded on behavioral grounds (thus the term “radical” or “to the root”), once the behavior of the scientist was included in the analysis.

Everyone would know that and there were be no sense of surprise about an article such as the target article were it not for this fact: Skinner’s analysis of language and cognition led him to conclude that while a scientifically valid study of thoughts and feelings was possible, it was not needed to understand overt behavior. In Skinner’s view (1957) thoughts and feelings were simply a behavioral stream like all others. For example, it was not that a person ran because of fear, or felt fear because of running. Both fear and running was established by the person’s history and context.

The mistake here is large, but subtle. If Skinner was right and language and cognition
was simply another action, he would be right about their importance in the direct analysis of over behavior. If a person plays both football and baseball well, no one would think to “explain” football throwing by reference to baseball throwing. Both skills are intertwined, but neither causes the other. Instead, both are the products of the person’s history and context. But behavior analysis now knows that language and cognition are not simply other actions.

Basic ACT Theory: Relational Frame Theory

ACT is built on a robust program of basic research on language and cognition: Relational Frame Theory (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001). RFT researchers have amassed a large body of work suggesting that the core of human language and cognition is the ability to learn to relate events under arbitrary contextual control. All complex animals can learn to relate events formally (e.g., to pick the bigger of two objects). Human beings seem to be especially able to abstract the features of such relational responding and bring them under contextual control so that relational learning can be applied to any events on the basis of arbitrary cues. For example, a very young child will treat a nickel as bigger than a dime – a slightly older one will know that a dime is bigger than a nickel. The difference is not just direct experience – is it acquiring the ability to relate events on the basis of social convention.

There are three main properties of this kind of relational learning. First, such relations show mutual entailment or “bi-directionality.” For example, if a person is taught that cold is the same as freezing, that person will derive that freezing is the same as cold. Second, such relations show combinatorial entailment. For example, if a nickel is smaller than a dime and a dime is smaller than a quarter, then it will be derived that a quarter is bigger than a nickel and a nickel is smaller than a quarter. Finally, such relations enable a transformation of stimulus functions among related stimuli. If you need to buy candy and a dime is known to be valuable, it will be derived that a nickel will be less valuable and a quarter will be more valuable, without necessarily directly purchasing candy with nickels and quarters. When all three features are established with a given type of relational responding, we call the performance a “relational frame.”

There are now over 70 empirical studies on RFT covering a vast range of topics, from metaphor to grammar; from the nature of a word to the social-verbal establishment of a sense of self (see Hayes et al., 2001). RFT shows Skinner’s crucial mistake: because events can acquire functions purely through relational (i.e., “cognitive”) means it is necessary to analyze cognition in order to understand overt human behavior because cognition alters the behavioral stream. Language alters how direct behavioral processes work.

ACT Philosophy: Functional Contextualism

ACT and behavior analysis itself is based on a variety of pragmatism known as functional contextualism (Biglan & Hayes, 1996; Hayes, Hayes, & Reese, 1988; Hayes et al., 1993). The core analytic unit of functional contextualism is the “ongoing act in context.” In ACT, psychological events as a set of ongoing interactions between whole organisms and
historically and situationally defined contexts. It is not possible to analyze behavior independently of context (e.g., merely analyzing behavioral symptoms would be totally uninteresting).

Analysis is pragmatic: its truth is assessed by its workability. In order to know what works, however, one must know what one is working toward: there must be the clear a priori statement of an analytic goal (Hayes, 1993). Goals enable analysis – they are not the result of analysis, and for that reason goals can only be stated, not justified. There are two major types of contextualism, organized in terms of their goals (Hayes, 1993): descriptive contextualism (e.g., hermeneutics, dramaturgy, narrative psychology, feminist psychology, social constructionism, and the like) which seeks an appreciation of the participants in a whole event, and functional contextualism (e.g., behavior analysis) which seeks the prediction and influence of ongoing interactions between whole organisms and historically and situationally defined contexts.

Viewed contextualistically, behavior analysis is a far more interesting area than when view mechanistically. For example, behavior analysis emphasizes the role of the environment in the analysis of behavior. This often seems strange from the outside since it seems to deny the role of agency, purpose, and meaning. But it is not that these psychological events are denied. It is that analyses that address only psychological actions (e.g., emotion, thought, overt action) can never be fully adequate given the pragmatic purposes of functional contextualism. “Prediction and influence” requires successful manipulation of events. It requires “independent” (i.e., manipulable) variables (Hayes & Brownstein, 1986). Thus, the environmentalism of behavior analysis is not dogmatic, but pragmatic. This approach is decidedly non-mechanistic. Unlike mechanism, the whole is primary and the parts are derived, truth is local and pragmatic, ontology is de-emphasized, the possibility of randomness is admitted, and values and goals are fundamental to the assessment of truth (for a detailed description of how such features fit with the writing of important behavior analysts such as Skinner see Hayes et al., 1988).

Theory and Technology

Other than RFT, none of these above features are new in behavior analysis. But RFT has allowed something else to happen that enables these features now to be known outside of the field in an unambiguous way. Behavior analysis has finally created forms of psychotherapy that reveal its core assumptions. Stated another way, the implications of the contextualistic features of behavior analysis are finally being translated into practice for all to see, now that the artificial barrier of Skinner’s mishandling of language and cognition is being removed. From an RFT perspective, the literal functions of language and cognition are not automatic or mechanical: they are contextual. Because of derived stimulus relations and transformation of stimulus functions, thoughts often function as if they are what they say they are. As a result humans avoid painful thoughts and evaluations; they live that is “about” (i.e., “refers to”) other things rather than being fully in the moment. These harmful effects of language (what ACT theo-
rists call experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion, see Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996) are challenged in ACT using methods RFT suggests: do not try to change the content, rather change the context.

On those grounds ACT therapists compassionately accept no reasons and stories as “true” if these stories are functionally useless or harmful, regardless of their reasonableness -- the issue is workability not reasonableness. ACT therapists make no attempt to rescue clients from the difficulty and challenge of growth. It is both the therapist’s and the client’s job to open up to experiences and to contact the present moment. Skepticism about the value of “truth” is pervasive. ACT therapists are cautioned not to argue or persuade. And so on.

It is not my point to try to explain ACT or its link to RFT in detail. The target article conveys the spirit of ACT quite well and the link to RFT is explicated elsewhere (Hayes et al., 2001). It is my point that the odd result this target article shows so nicely – an experiential therapy flowing directly from behavior analysis – is in a deep sense not odd at all.

Discuss.
REFERENCES


