



Promoting Social Intelligence Using the Experiential Role-Play Method

Linda L. Bilich and Joseph Ciarrochi

Why do humans have such difficulty getting along? We are capable of behaving badly towards each other even without any observable threats, provocation or external adversity. For example, between 25% and 50% of Australians have reported experiencing workplace bullying (Jetson, 2005; JobWatch, 1998; McAvoy & Murtagh, 2003). Bullying forms one part of what could be labeled *aversive interpersonal behavior*, along with other behaviors such as abuse (physical, emotional, etc.), gossiping, manipulation and lying. This behavior is particularly problematic in organizations as it can result in potential legal costs, lost time, reduced morale and motivation, and increases in staff turnover and recruitment (JobWatch, 1998; McAvoy & Murtagh, 2003; Salin, 2003).

In this chapter, we present a theoretically driven intervention that is designed to promote social harmony and effectiveness in the workplace. We will outline the theoretical basis and practical application of the program as was conducted with members of the New South Wales (NSW) Police organization. The program involved helping officers to develop effective interpersonal behavior in line with their values and related goals, especially in the context of distressing emotions and thoughts. The training program was a form of acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), which will be outlined below. This program was quite different from existing programs that seek to modify dysfunctional attitudes and explicitly teach social skills.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Our culture teaches us that positive thoughts and feelings are good, and negative thoughts and feelings are bad and ought to be removed or minimized. According to ACT theorists, humans can get caught in the cycle of trying to eliminate negative internal experiences (thoughts, memories, emotions, body sensations, etc.), in order to replace them with positive experiences. Unfortunately, our emotion control strategies may be a major source of our suffering (Wilson & Murrell, 2003). That is, our attempts to get rid of our feelings may paradoxically increase the extent that we experience those feelings (Wenzlaff & Luxton, 2003; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000).

The purpose of ACT is to help clients remove themselves from the cycle of emotional control and unhelpful beliefs, not by challenging or changing the thoughts, but by learning to react more mindfully to such thoughts. The goal of ACT is to help clients consistently choose to act effectively (concrete behavior in alignment with their values) in the presence of difficult private events.

ACT is based on a philosophy of functional contextualism (Hayes, 2004; Hayes et al., 1999; Hayes, Wilson, Gifford, Follette, & Strosahl, 1996), and a theory of language called relational frame theory (RFT; Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001). For the purposes of this chapter, we will not go into detail about this, and readers are encouraged to refer to the above referenced texts for further information. We will now briefly review ACT research.

ACT (Hayes et al., 1999) is referred to as a cognitive therapy that forms part of the third wave of cognitive-behavior therapies, such as dialectical behavior therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2001). ACT has been used effectively to treat numerous clinical disorders (i.e., depression) and health-related problems (i.e., pain) (see Bach & Hayes, 2002; Dahl, Wilson, Luciano, & Hayes, 2005; Eifert & Forsyth, 2005; Lundgren, Dahl, Melin, & Kies, 2006; Zettle & Hayes, 1986; Zettle & Hayes, 2002; Zettle & Raines, 1989). ACT has also been used with nonclinical populations, particularly in relation to work-related stress. There are several empirical studies that support the use of ACT for worksite stress and the reduction of long-term sick leave (Bond & Bunce, 2000, 2003; Bond & Hayes, 2002; Dahl, Wilson, & Nilsson, 2004; Flaxman, 2006).

ACT seeks to increase psychological flexibility, or the ability to contact the present moment fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends (Hayes et al., 1999). Psychological flexibility is established through six core ACT processes.

1. Acceptance. This process involves developing and increasing an individual's willingness to have and accept their private experiences. Individuals are encouraged to let go of emotional control and avoidance, when doing so promotes valued living. A common phrase often used in ACT is 'control is the problem, not the solution' (Hayes et al., 1999, p. 115).

2. Defusion. Fusion, the opposite of defusion, refers to when an individual's behavior is excessively controlled by their verbal content. For example, in a context that supports fusion, one's behavior might be excessively influenced by evaluations ('I'm not good enough') or rules (e.g., 'I must be loved by everybody'). When fused with a thought, one can lose contact with other direct and indirect psychological functions (Strosahl, Hayes, Wilson, & Gifford, 2004). Defusion is a process that involves undermining the verbal processes that promote fusion (Strosahl et al., 2004). Defusion involves teaching individuals to see thoughts for what they are and not what they say they are (Hayes et al., 1999). Defusion essentially undermines the power of words to act as barriers to effective action.

3. Getting in contact with the present moment. This process is equivalent to mindfulness. It involves individuals connecting with and being fully open to what is happening in the present moment, including difficult and negative private experiences, and connecting with one's values and living. According to Strosahl et al. (2004), the qualities that reflect this process are vitality, spontaneity, connection and creativity.

4. Self-as-context. In this process, individuals work on decreasing their attachment or fusion with a conceptualized self (i.e., I am boring; I am unlovable; I am hopeless) and increase their experiential contact with a transcendent sense of self, or self-as-context. People learn to see that they are not the same as their thoughts, feelings and physical pain. There is a self that observes all experience. This self is experienced as constant and stable, while feelings and evaluations come and go. The key phrase often used in this process is, 'you are not just your thoughts, emotions, memories, roles ... These things are the content of your life, whereas you are the context ... the space in which they unfold' (Hayes et al., 1999, p. 195). Once people context the self-as-context, they are presumably more willing to let go of unhelpful self-evaluations, or unhelpful cognitive content (Pierson & Hayes, 2007). People learn that giving up an unhelpful self-concept is not the same as giving up one's sense of self.

5. Values. Values refer to directions in life that individuals choose that result in enrichment, vitality and authenticity. An individual's behavior is guided by values. In this sense, values are never actually achieved, or obtained as concrete objects, yet they are always present every time an individual chooses them (Hayes et al., 1999; Pierson & Hayes, 2007). When an

individual is stuck and fusion and experiential avoidance dominate, it is easy for individuals to get 'off track' and engage in behaviors that are inconsistent with their values. For example, an individual may value meeting people and engaging socially with others. However, they avoid this situation because of the significant amount of anxiety they experience when they think about it. Helping individuals to let go of the struggle with negative private events allows them to regain their sense of direction and work on engaging in behavior that is consistent with their values. Willingness and acceptance of unpleasant private experiences, which are part of being human, are important processes that assist the individual in pursuing values and engaging in valued behavior (Strosahl et al., 2004).

6. Committed Action. Living according to our values often produces distress and the temptation to engage in experiential avoidance. Committed action involves engaging in behavior, in spite of difficult private experiences that may 'show up'. There will be failures and we do not always live up to our commitments from day to day. Commitment involves helping people return to their valued direction again and again.

There is no correct order for addressing these processes and not all individuals need work in each of the domains (Strosahl et al., 2004). To summarize, the ACT model purports that the normal verbal processes that influence psychological inflexibility make it difficult for humans to learn effectively from experience and to take advantage of opportunities afforded by situations (Pierson & Hayes, 2007). This translates to behavioral ineffectiveness in pursuing one's values in a range of areas, such as connecting in relationships and being effective at work. Behavioral ineffectiveness can result when individuals engage in avoidance behavior, instead of living their values. Applying the ACT model may lead to an increase in an individual's psychological flexibility, sensitivity to the current social situation and effectiveness in engaging in valued living.

ACT and Aversive Interpersonal Relationships

In this section, the therapeutic model of ACT will be expanded to a social-emotional training program that has been utilized with the NSW police. The aim of the program is to increase participants' effectiveness in interpersonal situations. The training mostly involved participants ranging from sergeants and above, and there are plans to provide training to officers across the board (i.e., recruits to Commanders).

Recently, much attention has been focused on leadership and what it means to be a good leader within workplaces and organizations (for example, see Austin, 2007; Kaiser, Hogan, & Craig, 2008; Leskiw & Parbudyal, 2007; Walz, 2007). Leadership is a quality that is also considered essential within

the NSW police organization, particularly as there is a section within this organization that is focused on developing leaders. Forster (2005) summarizes several important skills that are required for effective leadership including: enhancing and improving employees' performance through identifying and working towards common values and goals; making important changes that will enable their staff to be effective; and being concerned about the relationships that are developed with and among employees, which is particularly important for resolving conflict. 'The most effective leaders are very aware of the simple but powerful idea that effective leadership, like communication, is a two-way process ... leadership and followership is a dynamic relationship, based on the situations that people are facing' (Forster, 2005, pp. 24–25).

The training program that is described here supports and promotes the development of participants' leadership skills. The workshop aims to develop participants' ability to participate in a two-way process with fellow employees (which will be described shortly). For example, it has long been recognized that identifying and setting goals can have a 'powerful influence on the motivation and performance levels of individual employees and work groups' (Forster, 2005, p. 177). The ability of leaders to enlist their employees as 'change agents' in the identification, design and planning of common and self-determined goals can reduce employees' resistance, negativity and opposition to change (Toch, 2008). The goal is to help participants return to their workplaces with skills that influence cohesive teamwork, clear communication and awareness of one's own and other individuals' responses to situations.

These key is to help them to apply the skills in situations with high levels of stress. For example, difficulties arise because of overarching organizational systems, such as the hierarchical system in the police force, organizational change and restructures, and problems getting along with other individuals. These situations are likely to produce a great deal of distress among police officers. ACT helps officers to accept the distress that naturally shows up and to stay committed to their social values, even when distress seems to be pushing them in the wrong direction.

As mentioned previously, this training program has many of the same general goals as 'social skills training', as used in many CBT interventions. However, there are important differences.

Teaching Social Skills via Experiential Feedback vs. Verbal Suggestions

Social skills training programs are used to develop and improve such things as communication and assertiveness skills, social problem solving, negotiation, and team and organisation development (Baldwin, 1992; Taylor, 1990). Social skills training programs have been used with a wide range of populations, including clinical and nonclinical populations, and with a

range of clinical and behavioral problems such as anxiety, schizophrenia, excessive anger and parenting issues (see Deffenbacher, Oetting, Huff, & Thwaites, 1995; Deffenbacher, Thwaites, Wallace, & Oetting, 1994; Grizenko et al., 2000; Rosenfarb, Hayes, & Linehan, 1989; Taylor, 1990).

Studies have identified a number of problems with some social skills training programs, including failure of generalization of acquired skills across different events and over time, limited evidence supporting the long-term benefits of social skills training and the questionable effectiveness of measures that are used to assess social skills (Baldwin, 1992; Deffenbacher et al., 1994; Grizenko et al., 2000; Rosenfarb et al., 1989). It has been hypothesized that past interventions have not been maximally effective because they encourage excessive rule and instruction following and do not provide sufficient experiential contact with the context in which the behavior occurs (Follette & Callaghan, 1995; Hayes, Brownstein, Zettle, Rosenfarb, & Korn, 1986; Luoma et al., in press; Rosenfarb et al., 1989).

According to Follette and Callaghan (1995), there are several problems with teaching complex social behaviors using a strictly rule- and instruction-giving approach. First, it is difficult to know what rules to teach. For example, there are many different social rules that exist which relate to nonverbal communication, assertiveness, making complaints, teaching people and so forth. So which social rules are most important and need to be taught first? Second, situations and events can be unique; therefore this implies that they require their own set of 'unique rules'. Third, not all people will use or follow the same rules. Fourth, rules can often be quite complex to teach, as social situations can be filled with subtle and changing contingencies. Finally, social skills are more likely to be learned and shaped by the natural contingencies that occur during a social interaction, in the actual experience. The natural contingencies in an interaction are likely to become lost when rules dominate the learning experience (Follette & Callaghan, 1995, p. 414).

What does this all mean? It might be best to learn social skills via experience (Cherniss, 2000; Rosenfarb et al., 1989). One way to do this is to have people role-play social situations they find difficult (Rosenfarb et al., 1989). Then, the role-play partner can give some simple feedback (e.g., 'that was good'; 'I give that a 7 on a 1 to 10 scale'). The key is to maximize the extent that experience, rather than language, is shaping behavior. In support of this idea, Rosenfarb et al. (1989) found that experiential feedback was better than direct instruction in improving social skills deficits in adults.

The Three Levels of Social Training in ACT

The ACT social-emotional training program includes all the key ACT processes, as described earlier, and it does this by combining them all in social exercises. The program is based on a recent ACT model that has

been applied to the therapeutic relationship between therapists and clients (Pierson & Hayes, 2007). We will outline the model by Pierson and Hayes, and then show how this model can be adapted for social skills training.

In the ACT therapeutic relationship model, three levels have been identified that can assist with the therapeutic relationship (Pierson & Hayes, 2007). The first level concerns the 'psychological stance' of the therapist. That is, the therapist needs to be aware of their own psychological events, or private experiences, that are 'likely to show up' during the 'moment-to-moment' interaction of the therapist and client (Pierson & Hayes, 2007, p. 11). Therapists need to bring their ACT-relevant psychological skills (including acceptance, defusion and flexibility) to the therapeutic relationship.

The second level relates to the therapeutic process, in other words, the qualities of the therapeutic relationship that are empowering and enhance flexibility. The third level refers to the psychological process of the client (see Eifert & Forsyth, 2005; Hayes & Smith, 2005; Hayes & Strosahl, 2004; Hayes et al., 1999). All three levels can vary in terms of levels of acceptance, mindfulness, defusion, self-as-context, values and commitment. For example, I can accept my own emotions in the moment (level 1), the client can accept their emotions (level 3), and the relationship interaction can involve acceptance-related behavior (level 2).

Our social skills intervention utilized experiential role-plays to target all three of these levels. We first targeted the psychological stance of the participant, including their level of acceptance and willingness to experience difficult private experience, their ability to utilize defusion and mindfulness skills, and their connectedness with values and goals. This level could also be referred to as 'intrapersonal' training.

The second level concerns the ability of the participant to put into play the relevant ACT processes during a social interaction. For example, participants might practice being fully present to the other person, accepting and/or observably value-driven. The final level concerns the participant's attempts to increase ACT processes, such as acceptance in the other person. This level is particularly relevant to people who manage others. We help managers to help others engage in value-congruent behavior, accept the feelings they cannot change, be mindful of what they are doing, and so on.

The Experiential Role-Play Method in Practice

During the course of the workshops that were conducted with the police, participants identified several social situations that they found difficult to resolve, or that ended very badly. We decided that the experiential role-plays would be more useful if they closely resembled what the participants dealt with in everyday life. The exercise was done in a series of steps.

Step 1: Elicit the details of the situation. Participants are asked to identify a work-related interpersonal situation that they are struggling with, such as bullying at work, difficulty communicating with supervisor, or having to give a colleague negative feedback. Participants are asked to write the details of the situation, including the difficult private experiences that show up, the avoidance strategies that may be used and the value they would like to put into play (see ‘My Struggle’ worksheet in Appendix A). By writing about their private experiences, they are engaged in defusion as it involves them looking *at* the content of thinking, rather than *through* it.

Part of this exercise also requires that participants identify difficult behavioral patterns in themselves and others. If participants have difficulty identifying behavior patterns, we provide them with a table that lists several different types of behavior patterns, such as a ‘clam’ (e.g., behavior involves either brief or no response to questions), ‘sniper’ (e.g., behavior that is passive-aggressive, that is intended to tease or hurt the other person), or ‘bull’ (e.g., behavior that seeks to aggressively dominate a person). While we use these labels, we also encourage participants to not take them too seriously, and we help them to notice that no person is the same as a label.

Step 2: The role play. The facilitator asks if any of the participants would like to describe their difficult social situation to the group. Willing participants are also asked to role-play the situation. In most cases, the facilitator usually participates in the first role-play and will either ‘act’ out the behavior of the participant or the ‘other’ individual.

Step 3: Identify willingness, defusion and values. The facilitator asks the participant engaged in the role-play to identify their private experiences and to notice what happens during the interaction. They are also asked to identify their value in that situation, as well as the value of the other person involved in the situation.

Finally, they are asked the fundamental question: ‘Are you willing to have all the difficult private experiences that arise, particularly when trying to behave consistently with your value?’ For example, if the social situation involves giving negative feedback to a colleague, they are asked, ‘Are you willing to have anxiety show up in yourself, and sit with the anger of the other person, in order to do what you value?’ If they answer ‘yes’, then we move on to step 4 of this exercise. If the participant says ‘no’, then the facilitator engages them in some defusion work around the difficult feelings and thoughts, and/or talks about using a different behavioral approach, or putting a different value in play.

The 'Fundamental Question' worksheet (see Appendix B) provides some structure to what has been described above. The worksheet can be completed by the client, or it can be completed on a whiteboard by the facilitator.

Step 4: Experiment and provide experiential feedback. In this last phase of the exercise, the participant and facilitator may role-play the difficult social situation several times, each time trying a different approach. The role-play can continue for several minutes. After each role-play the facilitator and workshop participants should give the participant some simple feedback. People can rate the behavior on a 1 (*very ineffective*) to 9 (*highly effective*) scale and do not need to elaborate on their rating. The format follows that of Rosenfarb et al. (1989) where the rating is mainly based on a person's 'gut-level' and the facilitator does not specify what discrete behaviors the rating was based on. Participants are then encouraged to engage in their own role-plays in order to practice giving and receiving experiential feedback, as well as working on their own willingness, defusion, identifying values and choosing effective behavior in certain social situations.

There are two goals for this exercise. The first goal is for participants to discover what works for them via experiential feedback, as opposed to learning new rules or social skills. Secondly, participants are encouraged to use their acceptance and willingness skills in order to make room for unpleasant thoughts and emotions, and still engage in effective value-driven behavior. Ideally, in each of the steps of this exercise, the facilitator and participants are putting all of the ACT ingredients into play (i.e., mindfulness, acceptance, defusion, valued behavior, etc.).

The exercise also encourages participants to engage in social perspective taking. Through this exercise participants contact an observer-self that can watch the social situation unfold and notice how they and others are reacting. Participants learn to notice that the observer remains constant during the entire role-play and is not equivalent to their difficult thoughts and feelings. The observer helps them to step back from the situation, take a breath and choose an effective course of action in line with their values.

Finally, the exercise gives people a chance at improving the nature of their social interactions. For example, they are encouraged to be mindful and accepting during the role-play. After a practice interaction, they are asked what it felt like to be mindful. The interaction partner is also asked how it felt to interact with someone who was fully present to him or her.

Expansion of Experiential Role-play

The role-play forms an extensive part of the ACT social training workshop, and from this one-on-one role-play we have also developed a group role-play exercise. This role-play follows the same format as the experiential role-play, except that more participants are involved and the standard scenario that is used is a meeting. Participants are given the 'Fundamental Question Worksheet' (see above) and are asked to choose and work with one other individual in the role-play to practice identifying their values and private experiences that may arise during a difficult social situation. In this exercise, the facilitators encourage participants to engage in discussion about their behavior and reactions during the role-play based on what they have written on the worksheet, with particular attention focused on the ACT processes engaged in by participants.

Social Interaction Metaphors

The facilitators also use several ACT metaphors that highlight the struggles that we get caught in when social situations become difficult. Some of these metaphors can be found in the original ACT book (see Hayes et al., 1999) such as 'Joe the Bum Metaphor', 'Fish on the Hook Metaphor', and a group version of the 'Passengers on the Bus Metaphor'. The 'Tar Baby Metaphor', as we have called it, has proven to be particularly useful (Xavier, 2008). This metaphor is used to emphasize the problem of using ineffective control strategies repeatedly to control another person's behavior, and the way that these control strategies may further entangle you in a destructive relationship with the other.

Tar Baby Metaphor (adapted from Xavier, 2008)

Br'er Fox had enough of Br'er Rabbits tricks and of not being able to catch Br'er Rabbit. So one day, Br'er Fox comes up with a solution so that he can finally catch Br'er Rabbit. He creates a tar baby out of a lump of tar and dresses it up in some clothes, and hides behind a bush to see what happens to Br'er Rabbit when he passes by. Br'er Rabbit comes along, sees Tar Baby, and stops and says "Good morning", and tries to engage in a conversation with Tar Baby. Of course, Br'er Rabbit receives no response. Br'er Rabbit becomes increasingly frustrated by Tar Baby's lack of manners and decides that he's going to "beat" some manners into Tar Baby. He punches Tar Baby, and his fist becomes stuck. Br'er Rabbit again assumes Tar Baby is being rude so he punches it again to try and free himself, and his other hand became stuck. Br'er Rabbit again demands Tar Baby let go of him or he'll kick him. Tar Baby does not respond so Br'er Rabbit kicks him ... now, one of his feet is stuck. Eventually Br'er Rabbit's hands, feet and even head are stuck in Tar Baby.

So the fox seems to have won. Now with Br'er Rabbit stuck, Br'er Fox ponders the way he will dispose of Br'er Rabbit. This is when Br'er Rabbit quickly pays attention to the situation and figures out what to do. Br'er Rabbit

pleads with Br'er Fox: "Please, whatever, you do, don't throw me in the Br'er patch". Of course, the fox, who wanted to harm Br'er Rabbit as much as possible, throws him in the Br'er patch. That's when Br'er Rabbit escapes — rabbits are at home in briar patches or thickets.

The metaphor illustrates the idea that often, the more you seek to control a 'difficult person', the more you often get stuck to them and intertwined in their lives. It is as if you are making this person and the problem more and more important to your life, as opposed to living a valued life. In this metaphor, all of the ACT processes are reflected.

For example, the struggle that people find themselves in when they are 'stuck' in a difficult social situation corresponds to the ACT process of acceptance, more specifically 'control is the problem'. In a social situation, an individual who continues to use ineffective social behavior is like Br'er Rabbit. They end up getting stuck and 'nothing works'. Acceptance of one's own and the other person's private experiences, the situation and 'being stuck', may lead to psychological flexibility. Increased flexibility may enable the person to let go of having to 'control' their own private experiences and the other person's behavior. Psychological flexibility helps us to reconnect with our values, which leads to more effective and value-driven behavior. This whole process also involves being present and being aware of the context of the situation and doing 'what works', as opposed to being fused with private experiences. The value of 'living' for Br'er Rabbit helped him survive, in spite of being stuck in Tar Baby!

Conclusion

Why is it that we have such difficulty getting along? We have argued that our attempts to control our emotions become one part of the problem that leads to aversive interpersonal relationships. In the workplace this can prove to be costly (emotionally, financially and socially) not only to the individual, but also to other work colleagues, the employer and the business/organisation as a whole.

This chapter outlined an approach to reducing individual suffering and providing individuals with social skills in order to improve and empower interpersonal relationships. The approach is based on ACT and identifies the way in which the six core ACT processes can be used to reduce aversive interpersonal interactions in the workplace. An important part of this program is the use of experiential feedback to improve social skills. Experiential feedback enables an individual to become more aware of environmental contingencies, or the context of a situation and so orient their behavior to what may be most effective in that situation — what works.

Employee motivation and performance is likely to be enhanced by a manager or coworker that encourages value-congruent behavior, and

improves relationship quality. Getting along can be hard at times, yet if individuals are willing to accept and be mindful of the difficult emotions that show up in social relationships, they might be less likely to suffer. They may then be able to model and engage in effective behavior that will possibly lead to better relationships.

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APPENDIX A
My Struggle Worksheet

My Struggle: Work-Related Interpersonal Situation

Identify a work-related interpersonal situation that you are struggling with (i.e., bullying, communication problems, giving a colleague negative feedback). What value / goal were you trying to put into play? Write about this situation in the lines below:

Write about the difficult emotions and thoughts that showed up during this interaction

What was the outcome of this situation, or is it unresolved? What behaviour did you engage in?

What control strategies did you engage in? How did you try to make yourself feel better? Examples include: Playing big, avoiding the person, playing small, and making a sarcastic comment towards the other person.

Reflection question: How successful were these control strategies?

APPENDIX B
Fundamental Question Worksheet

The fundamental question: Willingness, values, and commitment

Value: What value would you like to put into play?

Internal "Bullies": What private experiences sometimes "push" you around and seem to get in the way of your valued action?

Thoughts/Evaluations

Emotions

Willingness: Are you willing to make room for these private experiences, in order to do what you value?

Yes: Go to the next step and commit to valued behavior. Carry your thoughts and feelings with you, like keys.

No: You may need to choose another value to put into play.

Commitment: What concrete actions would you like to commit to, that will put your values into play

Other's value: What value is the other person trying to put into play?

Other's Internal Bullies: What are likely to be the other person's "Internal Bullies"

Thoughts/Evaluations

Emotions

Other's actions: What behaviour would I like the other person to engage in?
Can I connect this behaviour to their values?
