

## **SOME FINAL, GULP, “WORDS” ON REBT, ACT & RFT**

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**ABSTRACT:** After reviewing the target articles of this issue, Hayes and Ellis respectively see less and more possibilities for integration. This concluding article attempts to better elucidate possibilities for integration between second and third wave CBT's, as exemplified by Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (REBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). We suggest that if ACT is going to err, it will be in the direction of being too afraid of talk. If REBT is going to err, it will be in the direction of not being afraid enough.

**KEY WORDS:** acceptance and commitment therapy; relational frame theory; functional contextualism; third wave behavior therapy; rational-emotive behavior therapy.

In responding to the target articles in this issue, Ellis finds integration much more possible than does Hayes. On close inspection, we think this difference, in part, may be a function of our own difficulties in clarifying the differences and similarities between Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), its underlying theory of how language works, Relational Frame Theory (RFT), and Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). These few pages offer our last chance to do so.

Ellis (p. 19) asserts, “But language itself doesn’t seem to cause’ disturbance while some kinds of internal language ... have been

shown . . . to be significantly more prevalent in emotionally anguished than in non-anguished people.” We believe a fairer interpretation would be that trouble comes when certain kinds of private, or public, language is not only prevalent but also “believed.” If the reader thinks, “I am a banana,” we doubt that thought will be believed even if it occurs one hundred times a day. Without now offering a technical definition, “believing” approximately means that the “thing” which is “believed” has a particular kind of “controlling role” in the production of other behavior. In ordinary language we say that when we “believe” something, we “take it seriously.”

Confusion arises at two points. The first comes when a thought, or anything else, that is “believed” is called a “belief” as if such naming provides an explanation for WHY it is believed. It might be useful to call a thought a “belief” in those contexts in which it is “believed,” i.e. is exerting a certain kind of “controlling role” in the production of other behavior. However, it provides no explanation for WHY one “believes” that which one believes or how to change this “controlling role.” Similarly, when Ellis notes (p. 5) “ . . . that Beliefs (Bs) were not merely cognitive, but also *included* emotions and behaviors,” he only expands that which is in need of explaining.

The second confusion comes when “beliefs,” “schemas,” “cognitive structures,” etc. are invoked as explanations for why thoughts, or anything else, are “believed.” Invoking “cognitive structures,” etc. does not provide an explanation of how such “controlling roles” by thought, images, sensations, etc. come into existence or are maintained. By analogy, such an “explanation” is like saying that sleeping pills work because they have sleep producing properties and that the proof that such sleep producing properties exists is that people often get sleepy when they take sleeping pills. No matter how sleepy individuals get after taking such pills, no explanation has yet been provided as to WHY sleepiness occurs. Thus, when individuals are said to “believe” things that don’t add up logically, empirically, or practically because they have “irrational beliefs,” “dysfunctional schemas,” etc., no explanation for WHY the thing in question is being “believed” has been provided.

Ellis points out that long ago Korzybski noted the FACT that people overgeneralize (Korzybski, 1933). RFT not only takes that, and other facts into account, but seeks to give an explanation of WHY that should be so. The WHY, according to RFT, is the very way language processes work. RFT has been thoroughly detailed, even if the

details are often excruciatingly difficult for a novice to grasp, and there is empirical work to support the theory. Thus, in the RFT view, such “overgeneralizing” is not a function of humans misusing language. It is a function of humans being misused by language processes.

If humans consciously produced the things that show up inside their skins, including thoughts, images, and sensations, it would make sense to say that it was the humans who are misusing language. However, most often these “things” simply “appear” with no effort, and especially no conscious effort. Further, when such thoughts as, “This is awful. I can’t stand it and it must stop,” are “heard in one’s head” or, for that matter, pop out of one’s mouth, they are often taken seriously. Why these “things” show up inside our skin and why such “things” are “believed” is, purportedly, explained by RFT. If RFT is wrong then it is wrong. But, if it is correct, then language processes themselves are, indeed, a problem to we humans and the problem is not we humans “misusing” such processes.

Hayes has a point when he notes that if we use linguistic processes in an effort to stop taking some language “seriously” we risk that the “language machine” will come back to bite us in some new way and, perhaps, even in the old way. Confining ourselves for the moment to “thoughts,” it is quite correct that a “true thought” is still “just a thought.” If one is sitting down while reading this article, one can notice the difference between the thought “I am sitting down while reading this article,” a thought which is true, and the actual experience of sitting down while reading this article, which is something quite different. The defusion techniques of ACT directly highlight this distinction and, by doing so, directly attack one hypothesized aspect of language, namely the tendency to fuse “symbols” with the experience they symbolize. ACT brings certain techniques to address problematic aspects of this language process to the consultation room. It does so not by accident but at the direction of the underlying theory of language detailed by RFT. As far as I (HR) have experienced in my twenty plus years as a recognized REBT Supervisor, there is nothing in REBT that brings this distinction to the fore and uses it for therapeutic advantage.

On the other hand, though we lose the disadvantages of language by constantly defusing from it, we lose its advantages as well. Thus, the thought, “I am reading this article while sitting down” is not only a “thought,” it is a TRUE, rather than a FALSE, one for those who

actually are reading this article while sitting down. While we readily stipulate a pragmatic theory of truth in contrast to one of correspondence, the categories of “true” and “false” can be useful even if they are ultimately based on “workability” rather than correspondence with the “real” parts of the world. It can be personally, and not just socially, useful to know if when I have the thought, “I am sitting down reading this article,” I am, indeed, doing that very thing. Thus, using the language of RFT, changing the context of relation (Crel), e.g. “No! It is not awful, only bad! I can stand it. I just don’t like it. And, besides, the world doesn’t HAVE TO go my way,” can have the effect not of changing content, or only changing content, but changing the “believability” of content, i.e. a particular kind of “controlling role,” of thoughts, images, sensations in the situation at hand and future situations as well. Admittedly, this move reduces believability by changing Crel’s and not by changing the context of function (Cfunc) as could be done by arranging conditions so that all words are experienced as “just a bunch of words”—not those words but the actual experience signified by “just a bunch of words.”

If REBT, or other second wave CBT, “disputing” is limited to making believed “content” not believed, and vice versa, only by means of changing Crel’s and never by changing Cfunc’s, and if “real” third wave CBT’s operate only by changing Cfunc’s and never by changing Crel’s, then Hayes is correct when he concludes that REBT will become a third wave CBT only by becoming unrecognizable as its former self. However, REBT “disputing” is not about changing content, it is about changing the believability of content. “Disputing” leaves open the question, “To what, if anything, should believability be attached?” ACT often answers, “Nothing verbal.” REBT often answers, in part, “Verbal things that actually help one accomplish one’s goals.” REBT further adds, for instance, that “things which are contrary to empirical fact,” i.e. “not true,” are, often, unlikely to help. Saying, “X is not true,” and “believing” it, changes the function of X. The change comes by means of putting “X” in a particular relational frame rather than undermining relational framing altogether. It changes “believability” by changing Crel’s rather than Cfunc’s.

Hayes (p. 22) gives a fine example of how changing Crel’s can be used in therapeutic service and in line with RFT. He then notes that this is not ACT. Fine! Never the less, it could be part of a perfectly legitimate RFT based, “third wave,” therapeutic strategy if such inclusion were not arbitrarily eliminated. We suggest that real inte-

gration and progress will require that practitioners and theoreticians can, and do, note the distinction between strategies based primarily on changing Crel's and those based primarily on changing Cfunc's. An integrated practice will, potentially, include both. Empirical test can inform when, if ever, one move is to be preferred to another, though Hayes, admittedly, feels the data are now running in favor of changing Cfunc's. If integration is possible, it cannot happen until we are all on the same page regarding a theory of language and we deeply hope RFT will prove to be the right page.

However, with regard to the practical, when Ellis suggests that meditation is mainly distraction, we think he is overlooking some important non-distraction uses, or aspects, of, at least some, meditation. For example, if individuals are focusing on thoughts, images, sensations, or other private experiences, they may not be focusing on things outside their skin. In this case, meditation might be understood as a distraction from those "exterior" or "real world" things. Additionally, some forms of meditation encourage individuals to "keep their mind clear" or focus repetitively on a word, phrase, or visual image. These, too, might be considered forms of distraction from that which shows up inside one's skin and is not the prescribed word, phrase, or visual image. However, some forms of meditation encourage individuals to notice that, when thoughts appear, they are only thoughts. When images appear, they are only images. When sensations appear, they are only sensations, etc. These are moves aimed at defusing from such private experiences, not aimed at being distracted from them. And, they often work for exactly that purpose.

We thank Dr.'s Hayes and Ellis for helping further a more informed discussion of the distinctions and similarities between certain "second wave" and "third wave" CBT's. We hope these efforts reduce needless human suffering. Just as fervently, we also hope they increase joyful living.

## REFERENCE

- Korzybski, A. (1933). *Science and sanity. An introduction to non-Aristotelian systems and general semantics*. Lancaster, PA: International Non-Aristotelian Library Publ. Co.