Relational Frame Theory: A brief introduction

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Abstract

This document contains a brief description of an new theory of language: Relational

Frame Theory (RFT). I think the theory is exciting because it is intended to be

practical and suggest concrete ways to improve all aspects of the human condition

(reasoning, social functioning, well-being, meaning, flourishing). This document will

discuss the main implications of RFT and put it into the context of Acceptance and

Commitment Therapy and Positive Psychology.

Relational Frame theory (RFT) uses operant principles to explain and influence complex cognitive phenomenon such as perspective taking, metaphor use, attitude development, persuasion, reasoning, and many other areas (Blackledge, 2003). A full discussion of RFT is beyond the scope of this introduction, but if you'd like to know more, please see Torneke's (2010) excellent book. Here we will elaborate on three of the more important principles for practitioners on the frontlines.

Principle 1: **Language processes dominate and transform experience**

While have language, we can anticipate the future and thus, are fully aware of our mortality. Thus, we suffer a great deal, even in the absence of deprivation or threat. You give a dog enough to eat, a comfortable life, and shelter, and that dog will generally be content. In contrast, give people food, safety, and shelter, and they will still find ways to be unhappy. Maybe they'll avoid talking to people for fear of being rejected, or spend their days ruminating over an injustice done them, or starve themselves to have the "right" body shape, or shut themselves in a room, terrified of what is outside. RFT-based analyses suggest that the cause of this suffering is language and its bi-directional nature.

Bi-directionality means that words (or symbols) can have the same power as experience, even when those words don't predict experience. To illustrate this point, let's do an experiment: I give a dog a piece of cake (and this dog is very fond of cake). Then I say out loud "cake." Later I say the word "cake" again and discover that the dog shows no response. This is because I said "cake" after I gave him the cake. He will never react to the word "cake," unless it predicts (i.e. immediately precedes the appearance of) actual cake. This is true throughout the non-human animal kingdom: Animals do not respond to symbols unless those symbols have predicted

actual events in the world. I can only get the dog to respond to the word "cake" if I first say it and then quickly follow it with actual cake.

Let's now do the same experiment with a verbally-able boy who has never heard the word "cake." I give him a piece of cake and after he has eaten it I say "cake." A few hours later, I again say the word "cake." The boy may well look around for the cake and salivate. He might say, "I'm hungry." Thus, the word "cake" conjures up the experience of actual cake; we could say it makes cake "present." And it does this without ever having predicted (i.e. immediately preceded) the appearance of cake.

We start to get into trouble when we move beyond desserts into the darker realms of evaluation and criticism. Symbols let us worry about a future that may never come (e.g., cancer), or a past that is no longer here (the memory of an abusive co-worker). Symbols give us the power to transform our sense of self, even in the absence of any positive or negative experience. Someone can tell us that we are stupid. If we buy this, we may act as if we are stupid, even before we have engaged in any behavior that might be labeled "stupid." Or someone can tell us that John, a co-worker, is a "cancer in the organization." Now, although we have not yet had any experience with John, we may act as if John is in fact dangerous. We may avoid him, and experience fear when we see him.

Language is explosive. It touches everything and changes or perceptions of everything. For example, if we learn only two relationships from experience, research suggests that we are can derive four more with no direct experience and or training. "Verbal growth" is exponential, so if we learn four relations, we will be able to derive sixteen for free (Tornke, 2010; Whelan & Barnes-Holmes, 2004; Whelan, Barnes-Holmes, & Dymond, 2006). And if we learn one thousand relations, we can derive

one million new ones! *Notice* how much of our understanding can be based in our language processes rather than on direct experience.

The upside of language is that it helps us survive (e.g., Don't eat that berry! It will make you vomit). The downside is that we can use the same processes to beat ourselves up with words, or to beat others up. We can act according to our thoughts about experience, rather than our actual contact with experience. We can make events more aversive simply through thinking about them. In this way, we can easily become disconnected from the world of direct experience – what we can see, hear, touch, taste and smell -. and increasingly live in our own world of complex mental symbols.

Many ACT and Positive Psychology interventions are designed to overcome the dominance of unhelpful symbols. Mindfulness is the most obvious intervention that seeks to help people contact the present moment rather than being stuck in a symbolic past or future. Other interventions involve the development of meaning and purpose as a compass for navigating through the competing demands and challenging social interactions that characterize daily life.

Principle 2: Language expands the targets of avoidance.

We all naturally avoid physical threats: things in the outside world that can genuinely hurt or harm us. But language gives us the chance to avoid things in the inner symbolic world as well. We can seek to avoid painful memories or unpleasant thoughts about the future (e.g., we may tell ourselves "I musn't worry", or 'Don't dwell on it'). We can label our own feelings as 'good' or 'bad' and seek to avoid the "bad" ones.   We can turn our evaluations onto our sense of self, and find parts of ourselves to be 'flawed', 'bad', 'weak', etc - and then spend large parts of our life trying to avoid feeling inadequate. Research now clearly indicates that chronic avoidance can promote additional suffering and ineffective action (Ciarrochi,

Kashdan, Leeson, Heaven, & Jordan, 2011; Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006) .

Experiential acceptance interventions are designed to reduce this avoidance by-product of language. Some have argued that the emotional control strategies found in cognitive behavioral therapy (e.g., relaxation) may unintentionally reinforce experiential avoidance. Interestingly, many positive psychology practitioners focus more on increasing pleasant emotional and cognitive states, rather than on trying to avoid unpleasant ones. However, the direct challenging and disputation of negative thoughts, with the aim of trying to avoid or get rid of them, is a widespread approach within popular positive psychology programs – presumably as a result of Seligman's seminal book, 'Authentic Happiness', which strongly advocated the practice.

At this point in time, there is only a small body of research to suggest that seeking to increase positive states has the same unhealthy consequence as seeking to avoid negative states (Gruber, 2011; Gruber, Mauss, & Tamir, 2011). Caution might be warranted as it appears that the more you value, desire, or make it a fundamental life aim to be happy, the more difficult it becomes to experience this exalted state (Kashdan, Breen, & Julian, 2010; Mauss, Tamir, Anderson, & Savino, In press).

Principle 3: We can have a positive influence on language processes.

A key assumption of RFT is that language is not merely a by-product of some innate language machine. Rather, language processes can be influenced by context (e.g., you can reinforce language processes linked to rumination, worry, and problem solving). The good news for practitioners is that they can learn to influence language in many positive ways. Language processes are of central importance to all seven of the foundations of flourishing described by Ciarrochi, Kashdan, and Harris (in press). *Functional beliefs* such as hope and self-esteem are fundamentally verbal,

mindfulness may be seen as diminishing the predominance of a language over direct experience, *perspective taking* can be seen to emerge from basic language processes relating the sense of "me" to various perspectives (e.g., you, here, there), *values* are verbally constructed statements about cherished ideals, *experiential avoidance* involves verbal labels and evaluations of internal states, *behavioral control* (e.g., self-discipline) is fundamentally about mapping values (verbal processes) to action, and *cognitive skill* can be defined as how well you are able to engage in relational framing. Language processes appear to be at the heart of everything we do.

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