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Mike Clayton, Ph.D., BCBA-D, received his doctoral degree from the University of Nevada in 1998. Subsequently, he held faculty positions at the University of Guam, Shenzhen University in the People’s Republic of China, and at Jacksonville State University. He is now Associate Professor of Psychology at Youngstown State University and the Director of the Master’s in Applied Behavior Analysis program. Dr. Clayton’s applied research has focused on behavioral safety, large-scale organizational interventions, sustainability, and performance feedback implementations in human service settings. His basic experimental work has focused on verbal behavior and derived relational responding. In 2010, Dr. Clayton was the recipient of a Distinguished Professor for Scholarship award at Youngstown State University.

Julie Blaskewicz Boron, Ph.D. earned her master’s and doctoral degrees from The Pennsylvania State University in 2003 and 2005, respectively. She completed postdoctoral training in Cognitive Aging at Georgia Institute of Technology from 2005 through 2007. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Youngstown State University. Broadly, Dr. Blaskewicz Boron’s research incorporates personality, emotion, and everyday problem solving across the adult lifespan. Within these areas, she investigates age differences and changes, resulting in research that is descriptive, explanatory, and informative for interventions in early and late adulthood.

Expansion of OBM: How RFT and ACT Can Influence Our Field

By Sarah VanStelle, M.A., Jeana Koerber, M.A., & Eric Fox, Ph.D.

The present paper was prompted by a discussion that took place on the OBM Network Google group in January/February 2010. The introduction of this paper is designed to provide some context for those OBM Network members who do not follow the Google group postings and, additionally, to provide a brief overview of Relational Frame Theory (RFT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to the OBM community.

Relational Frame Theory (RFT) is a behavioral theory of language and cognition. The purpose of RFT is to provide a cohesive behavioral account of thinking, reasoning, rule-following, stimulus equivalence, and understanding, among other high-level cognitive behaviors. The basic premise of the theory is that deriving stimulus relations is the basis of human language and cognition. Furthermore, RFT is an account of how deriving stimulus relations is learned operant behavior—a generalized form of relational responding. As such, both direct and derived relations among stimuli, concepts, thoughts, etc., are the result of learned operant behavior and are therefore subject to behavioral contingencies. The RFT account is different from the analysis of equivalence relations with which many of us are familiar (Sidman, 1994).
RFT requires no new behavioral principles to account for equivalence and other derived relations; patterns of relational responding become generalized operants through multiple exemplar training and differential reinforcement. But RFT emphasizes many stimulus relations other than equivalence, and this broader emphasis allows analyses of much more complex and interesting patterns of responding. These analyses allow high-level cognitive behaviors to be explained by operant theory and suggest how they can be affected by learning and conditioning processes. More detailed information on RFT can be found at: http://www.contextualpsychology.org and in Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, and Roche (2001).

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy/Training (ACT) is the most prominent application of RFT. ACT focuses on teaching a client techniques intended to help them maintain healthy contact with previously avoided negative private events (i.e., thoughts or feelings) and to teach them to behave in a manner that aligns with their individual values. Instead of trying to change or avoid unpleasant emotions and thoughts, ACT teaches the individual to accept these negative private events (and in many cases change the behavioral functions the events have for the individual) in order to lead a healthy, fulfilling life as a conscious human being. ACT has its basis in RFT in that it emphasizes the contextual, discriminative control over both the complex verbal relations involved in cognition/emotion and the functions such events and stimuli have for individuals. Some ACT techniques work by providing a context that disrupts the network of verbal relations traditionally supported by the verbal community and others work by providing a context in which the “normal” functions of words and other stimuli are extinguished or altered. More information about ACT can be found at: http://www.contextualpsychology.org; in Hayes, Strosahl, and Wilson (1999); and in Hayes (2005).

ACT has been used sporadically in organizational settings throughout the past decade (Bond & Bunce, 2000; Bond & Bunce, 2003; Bond & Flaxman, 2006; Dahl et al., 2004; Donaldson-Feilder & Bond, 2004; Hayes et al., 2004; VanStelle, 2009). ACT lends itself well to a multitude of areas because of the flexible nature of its theory and techniques; that is, any applied area of behavior analysis that involves verbal behavior should be able to find RFT and ACT useful. OBM is heavily focused on the verbal behavior of adults, and given the limited influence Skinner’s analysis of verbal behavior (1957) has had on the field thus far (Fox & VanStelle, 2010), it seems logical to consider the contributions of another behavioral account of language (RFT).

In January of 2010, a discussion on the OBM Network Google Group was prompted questioning the relevance of ACT/RFT in OBM. Initially, Todd Ward referenced the JOBM special addition on RFT and ACT (vol. 26, issue 1) to provide evidence of the potential use and application in OBM research and practice. While RFT and ACT may be useful in OBM settings, it was questioned (by Terry McSween) how much data and empirical support existed in relation to the conceptual argument for their use. Scott Herbst pointed out that RFT has a wealth of empirical support, particularly arbitrarily applicable relational responding (AARR). He stated that many of the processes engaged in by humans in organizations are influenced by verbal responding; thus, it would benefit a consultant to use an approach that focuses on the relations involved in language and rule-governed behavior in the workplace. Using this approach would allow OBMers to “impact how people behave at work – from their performance, to their likelihood to turnover, and to the more touchy feely things we don’t tend to dwell on (but I like!) such as satisfaction.” Herbst indicated that it would be useful to investigate how ACT/RFT would impact OBM; however, we need clear measurement guidelines in order to stay true to our applied behavior analysis roots, yet move forward with our science. Donny Newsome responded to the thread and expressed his support of RFT/ACT in OBM. He stated that while we should be open to new theories and applications, such as RFT/ACT, we should still be skeptical until there are more data. He suggested that our reliance on skepticism as a science has allowed us to stay cohesive. We need to determine how we define ourselves as a field (e.g., by technologies, general methods, theory or philosophy) in order to decide how to potentially incorporate RFT/ACT. Also, how one defines the field would likely impact the relevance of RFT/ACT in OBM to that individual.
Terry McSween then commented that, although he remains open to the impact RFT/ACT may have in OBM, there are three criteria that must be met before the theory can convert to practice: “(1) clear guidelines/strategies/tactics/methodology for application in OBM settings, (2) evidence of behavior change, and ideally, (3) evidence that the changes in behavior impact on organizational outcomes (even soft ones such as satisfaction).”

Richard O’Brien raised the issue that Skinner’s model of applied behavior analysis (ABA) is incomplete, but provides a good “general” account of operant learning. The field of behavior analysis has experienced theoretical clashes in the past, such as that which happened between Tom Gilbert and Skinner. He stated that Tom Gilbert never abandoned the general behavioral model as outlined by Skinner, and neither is Steve Hayes. O’Brien views ACT/RFT as a contribution to our OBM analyses and not a replacement. He also pointed out that ACT/RFT could help OBM researchers and practitioners to build a stronger model. Lastly, O’Brien stated that although it may not be necessary to analyze every single interaction using RFT, our typical verbal analyses are often inadequate.

Cloyd Hyten pointed out that although he finds the RFT book fascinating, he is unsure about its potential use in OBM. He also stated that it is important for us to spend time analyzing humans as “verbal beings” and that RFT may be the mode in which to operate. But he questioned how long it would take for widespread adoption of RFT to occur in our field.

Lewis Weber then pointed out that even though RFT is a useful tool, it might be difficult to implement in complex organizational settings, stating that even positive reinforcement has its difficulties. Weber summarized his discussion of RFT by stating the potential impact that an RFT analysis may have on the rule-following behavior of individuals in an organization; that is, an organization is a rule-governed entity, and having an increased focus and a more thorough analysis of rules for performance improvement could lead to more productive behavior.

Scott Herbst provided an excellent example of how relational responding could impact performance in an organization. To summarize, Herbst described an example of some potential relational frames, and how they could become apparent in supervisor/subordinate relationships and how these behaviors could be modified through meaningful conversation and coaching to recognize the biases that were pre-existing in the relationship. He then pointed out that this example is based on his personal experience and stated that he would like a behavioral way of analyzing these types of situations. Lastly, Herbst provided other examples of areas where RFT and ACT could be useful, such as in creating buy-in and alignment.

Finally, the discussion concluded with Lewis Weber commending Herbst on his suggestions. Weber also pointed out that there is a lot of potential for the use of ACT in coaching sessions and the reduction of verbal errors that may occur through adjusting relational frames.

This discussion provides many ideas for future research within the realm of RFT and ACT and their potential usefulness in organizational settings. Due to the verbal nature of organizations, it would seem that these techniques could become quite useful with further empirical support to back them up. It is heartening to see the positive but skeptical discussion that has taken place with respect to these two concepts; it suggests that although prominent members of the field of OBM demand more “proof,” they are still open to new ideas. This demonstrates growth and evolution at its finest!

Thanks to the members of our organization for a very enlightening discussion of two relatively new concepts in the field of OBM!

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Sarah VanStelle received her BS in Psychology and her MA in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from Western Michigan University. She is currently a doctoral candidate at WMU under Dr. Alyce Dickinson. Sarah is a graduate assistant for the psychology department at WMU and is currently employed by the Kellogg Company in Battle Creek, MI. She is also the acting membership coordinator of the OBM Network.

Jeana Koerber received her BS in Psychology and her MA in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from Western Michigan University. She is currently a doctoral candidate at WMU under Dr. Alyce Dickinson, progressing on her dissertation entitled the “Implementation of a Staff Management System to Increase Consumer Engagement in Group Homes”. Jeana is also the senior graduate therapist of the Community Mental Health and Psychological Treatment Services Team at WMU and acting treasurer of the OBM Network.

Eric Fox is the Owner & Director of FoxyLearning and a digital content developer for Cengage Learning. He holds a Ph.D. in Learning & Instructional Technology from Arizona State University, and a BA and MA in Psychology from the University of Nevada, Reno. His research and professional interests include instructional design and technology, relational frame theory, and contextualism/pragmatism. He previously served as a faculty member in the Psychology Department at Western Michigan University and as Dean of Instruction at Saybrook University.