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Developing a Flexible Self

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ABSTRACT

Only humans have a sense of self. This sense of self can be a double edged sword. On the one hand it allows us to identify our passions and values and live in accordance with them sacrificing short term gains for more meaningful long term gains. However, this self concept that we hold so tightly can also result in rigidity that traps us from living in meaningful ways. The self has been recognised as a critically important aspect of human psychology. A functional approach to understanding the self would be invaluable in informing intervention to help those with self related problems. The current paper articulates a three step approach to a healthy self concept grounded in Contextual Behavioural Science.

Keywords: Training, SME, Instructional Design, Behavior-Based Safety, Goal setting

INTRODUCTION

One thing that most psychologists and psychotherapists agree on is the importance of a sense of self. A healthy self is pretty much universally seen as a prerequisite for sound mental functioning, while dysfunctional or underdeveloped aspects of self are understood to contribute to poor mental health. We suggest that the sophisticated capacity of humans to understand themselves and others can be a double edged sword. The capacity to understand and evaluate ourselves can help us to clarify what is important to us and allow us to set and achieve goals towards living a meaningful life. This sense of self can also trap us into a description that makes us feel lacking when compared to others ('they are better than me'), that can hamper effective communication and relationships with others ('I must not expose myself') and can result in arbitrary barriers to moving towards a meaningful life ('I am not good enough'). Self related problems are at the root of clinical disorders. For example, a lack of understanding ourselves or the ability to take the perspective of others, empathise and have self compassion are repeatedly being linked to greater emotional resilience, more accurate self-concepts, more caring relationship behaviour, as well as less narcissism and reactive anger (Neff, 2003). Self related problems range from a lack of understanding of the self and others (a pattern that is linked to autistic spectrum

conditions; Lind, 2010) to a strong attachment to a negative self concept (a pattern linked to clinical depression; Rimes & Watkins, 2005). Functional approaches to maladaptive behaviour are becoming increasingly popular in psychological approaches. The current talk will discuss a bottom up functional approach to understanding the self that will provide critical knowledge on how to predict and influence self related problems.

SELF IN CONTEXTUAL BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE

From the CBS point of view the sophisticated sense of self we narrate about is a uniquely human skill (McHugh & Stewart, 2012). According to CBS the experience we have of self is a by product of language. Language involves responding to abstract relations and the self is the product of learning to put one's own behaviour into relation to others. More specifically, the self involves learning to verbally discriminate ones own behaviour from others' behaviour. This basic pattern of learning begins in early childhood. For example, if I ask a very young child what she had for breakfast there is a chance she may well say what their sister had because she does not yet have an understanding of the word YOU and the word I. She may not understand that when I ask YOU it demands a response about I. As children get older and they learn to respond to the words YOU and I they will then be able to answer that question accurately. As a child begins to relate more and more of their own behaviour – ('I feel happy') and to compare it with that of others ('I am happier than you') they begin to have a concept of self ('I am a happy person'). As the child grows into an adolescent these repertoires of relating one's own behaviour to others become increasingly fluent.

DERIVED RELATIONAL RESPONDING (OR RELATIONAL FRAMING) AND PERSPECTIVE TAKING

As a sense of self develops so too does the ability to understand that others have desires, beliefs and wishes also. From the CBS perspective relating is a key language-based skill that underpins the development of empathy, a sophisticated sense of self, and transcendence. Children learn to relate his/her own behaviour as different from that of others by learning three key 'deictic' or 'perspective' relations which are "I versus YOU", "HERE versus THERE" and "NOW versus THEN". They learn to respond appropriately to questions such as 'What are YOU doing HERE?', 'What am I doing NOW?', 'What was I doing THEN?' etc. As children gradually learn to respond appropriately to these questions. And as they learn that whenever they are asked about their own behaviour they always answer from the point of view of 'I', 'HERE' and 'NOW'. They will learn this perspective is consistent and different from that of other people. For example, if you ask me about my behaviour, I will always answer from the position of 'I', 'HERE' and 'NOW' in response to your question asked by YOU, THERE (where you are) and THEN (when you asked – a few seconds ago). I is always from this perspective here, not from someone else's perspective there. A sense of self is therefore abstracted through learning to talk about one's own perspective in relation to other perspectives.

THREE STEPS TO A FLEXIBLE SELF IN CBS?

Table 1 (next page) outlines three steps to the development of a flexible self from the CBS

point of view. From this point of view deficits in any of these steps will result in self related problems. Step 1 involves perspective relational frames (or deictic relational frames) that specify a relation in terms of the perspective of the speaker. The most important frames are I-YOU, HERE-THERE and NOW-THEN (see Figure 1 for an illustration of the 3 steps). Acquisition of these frames means learning to differentiate my behaviour ('I') from that of others ('YOU') and learning that my current responding is always 'HERE' not 'THERE' and 'NOW' not 'THEN' (see Table 1). Training protocols have been developed that specifically target training this repertoire when deficient (see McHugh, Barnes-Holmes & Barnes-Holmes, 2009, for a review). Step 2 involves empathy training via the transformation of emotional functions (i.e., transferring the emotional effects from I to YOU). Empathy involves the transformation of emotional functions via deictic relational frames. In nontechnical terms, we adopt the perspective of others and this allows us to "feel their emotions." Step 3 involves deictic 'self-as-context' training regarding one's own private events. The experience of self-as-context is the invariant in all perspective discriminations [i.e., 'HERE and NOW']. Self-as-context can be thought of as a transcendence of psychological content that allows acceptance of that content.

CONCLUSION

This three step guide to a flexible self as articulated by CBS can inform a functional analytic bottom up account of what it is to have a healthy self concept and inform the design of effective intervention for populations with self related problems.

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STEPS	THEORY	EXAMPLE
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Basic deictic training	Deictic relational frames specify a relation in terms of the perspective of the speaker. The most important frames are I-YOU, HERE-THERE and NOW-THEN. Acquisition of these frames means learning to differentiate my behavior (“I”) from that of others (“YOU”) and learning that my current responding is always “HERE,” not “THERE” and “NOW” not “THEN.”	“If I were you, where would I be?” “If I were you and here was there, where would I be?”
2. Empathy training	Empathy involves the transformation of emotional functions via deictic relational frames. In nontechnical terms, we adopt the perspective of others and this allows us to “feel their suffering.” This may prompt us to help them; however, if the suffering is too much, we may avoid deictic framing.	“I feel sad. If you were me, how would you feel?”
3. Self-as-context (Flexible self)	Deictic framing also enables the experience of self/other-as-context, the invariant in all deictic discriminations (i.e., “HERE and NOW”). Self/other-as-context can be thought of as a transcendence of psychological content that allows acceptance of that content. This includes acceptance of painful content produced through empathic responding to the suffering of others, which can support empathic responding.	“I watch thoughts and feelings come and go. Who is it that is watching them

Table 1: Three-Level Guide to a Flexible Self.

AUTHOR – INVITED SPEAKER



Louise McHugh's research interests are centered on the experimental analysis of language and cognition from a behaviour analytic and Relational Frame Theory perspective, including especially the development of complex cognitive skills such as as perspective-taking and the process-level investigation of behavioural and cognitive psychotherapies including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. She has published over 60 papers on these topics and has received funding from several sources including the British Academy, the Leverhulme Trust, the Waterloo Trust and the Welsh Assembly. Most recently she was awarded a European Marie Curie career integration award and honored as an association for contextual behavioural science fellow.