

# **THE PARALLEL OF BEHAVIORAL PSYCHOLOGY AND ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT: BRIDGING SCHOLAR AND PRACTITIONER**

**Erica SOKOL**

Benedictine University  
(United States of America)

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate a parallel between the fields of psychology and organization development. The writer will present contemporary OD models, theories of psychology, and the connecting theme of language as the link between scholars and practitioners. Theories of psychology discussed are contextual behavioral sciences—Relational Frame Theory (RFT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). The writer will demonstrate how understanding the importance of language in organization development will aid change agents in producing smoother transitions and change, while also strengthening OD. RFT teaches that humans form correlations between language and stimuli and that the intensity and context of those correlations may lead to psychological pathology. Accordingly, to address undesirable behaviors, proponents of RFT advocate the use of ACT. ACT attempts to alleviate human suffering by increasing psychological flexibility through mindfulness practices and committed action towards values in an effort to increase psychological flexibility and facilitate change. OD practitioners can improve their understanding of how humans process change and transition through language. If we accept OD's traditional claim that at its core are humanistic values, we must consider offerings from the field of behavioral psychology for OD to be most effective in practice.

**Key words:** Organization development - Organization behavior – Transitions - Change

## **INTRODUCTION/PURPOSE**

As scholar-practitioners, we have a responsibility to exhaust the literature as a curious scientist. The job of a researcher is to demonstrate no stone has been left unturned and explain the 'why.' When researchers fail to dig to the core to explain a phenomenon or new theory the field typically does not benefit. Theory after theory is created to explain what has already been explained. At the very least if one is going to create a new theory, help the user understand 'why' and 'how' this theory came to be beyond superficial observations. Explain beyond the context by elaborating on scientific principles. When studying people a researcher must have an understanding of behaviorism. Applied Behavioral

Analysis (ABA) teaches us every behavior is linked to an antecedent and a consequence (Frykman, et al., 2011). The antecedent is what happens right before the behavior. The consequence happens right after the behavior. Operant psychology teaches us that behavior can be reinforced as a result. Now let us understand this a little more. All behavior has a function and serves a purpose for the individual. Behavior can have more than one function. There are four functions to every behavior according to ABA. ABA states the four functions as sensory stimulation, access to a tangible, escape, access to attention. Language links behavioral psychology to OD theory. Language plays a vital role in how people respond to their environment. Understanding how language impacts us may help leaders develop, execute, and empower people during change. Later we will explore why language is the link which ties psychology to OD.

It is not surprising psychology and organization development (OD) overlap each other. Specific overlaps in psychology can be particularly observed in the models and theories Relational Frame Theory (RFT) and Acceptance and Commitment Theory (ACT). Models in OD which resemble and build on top of each other and psychological models are Dialogic OD, Agility OD, Appreciative Inquiry (AI), Lewin's Force-field analysis, groups, and leadership. Today's interventions such as survey feedback, process consultation, and team building assist workers to become aware of their internal process into consciousness and how this impacts the working environment. Bond, Hayes, and Barnes-Holmes (2006) states ACT and RFT research in OBM directly relate back to OD interventions such as Lewin's T-groups which bring people's unconscious conscious, one of the original OD interventions.

Often we are not mindful of the power a single word has over us. Heidegger stated, "language does not just convey information but actively shapes how we think and therefore the world we live in (Lemay, et al., p. 17, 2007)." Thoughts are manifested through language, which leads to emotional and physical sensation resulting in behavior. Language in any culture communicates the beliefs, traditions, and values of the people. The power of a word is socially constructed and agreed upon by the people. Bushe and Marshak, 2015 write "social reality created by human interaction has influenced Dialogic Mindset." Furthermore, Cooperrider (2008) notes, "A fundamental assumption underlying AI is that the language one uses creates one's reality."

This paper will briefly review key organization development theory and evidence-based psychological interventions and theory which will explain how language impacts OD.

## **ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT THEORY**

### **Dialogic OD**

Dialogic asserts that OD has been constructed on the premise of diagnostic theory and research. Bushe and Marshak (2014b) suggest OD practitioners expand the field and practice by applying a "dialogic mindset" rather a "diagnostic" mindset when addressing change efforts. Bushe asserts eight principles to Dialogic OD and through the cycle stakeholders make meaning of the change and participate in conversations by choice because of shared interest.

Additionally, Bushe states what he terms *adaptive challenges* “often require changes in the values beliefs relationships in mindsets” and a general overall in change throughout the organization. Identifying the *adaptive challenges* leaders begin to see how the mindset of the individuals within the organization can create challenges. Change efforts can be difficult across the organization particularly if the individuals within the organization are firmly rooted in their values and beliefs. Bushe (2020) states “during this time it requires experiments and discoveries which may lead to deadends or wrong paths”(p.28).

Dialogic OD asks the leader to view the organization not merely as a unit to be changed but rather as a group of individuals who have a mindset constructed in the social context. The goal of the leader is to gain buy-in through a change in mindset by joining the group and create shared meaning through conversation.

### **Agility OD**

The Agility Factor as we later learn comes down to the leader’s ability to create the value of flexibility throughout the organization. Worley et al. 2014 state “agility – a system of routines that allows a company to make repeated organization changes when necessary (p. xiv). Having the ability to notice the external environment, adjust the plan, and execute a new action requires one to manage the thoughts and emotions of uncertainty to survive, otherwise known as *perceiving* in The Agility Factor. Worley et al. (2014) argue “high performers possess a capability to change their resources and processes repeatedly...both sense and adapt to environmental threats and opportunities as well as intentionally execute on strategic initiatives (p.16).” These organizations are built or lead to have the ability to shapeshift, maneuver, and see the big picture without being glued to one way of doing something. The research had shown in each industry above-average success was possible while it also proved failures for some organizations. Worley et al. (2014) state, “Agility allows the organization to adapt, over and over again, in meaningful ways to support above-average performance over long periods of time (p. 19).” Worley et al. (2014) state, “dynamic capability - the potential to sense opportunities and threats, solve problems, and change the firm’s resources and processes (Worley et al., p. 27, 2014).” Agility in organizations takes leadership to set the foundation. Leaders are responsible for setting the tone of ‘it is OK to think creatively.’ Ultimately agility in organizations is to stay ahead of the competition by adjusting to external demands with swift action. Mindsets like OD Agility do not happen overnight. This is done through listening and communicating in ways the people in the organization understand and increase cognitive flexibility.

### **Appreciative Inquiry (AI)**

AI works with the strengths of the organization and builds upon the strengths by giving the people permission to dream about the future and grow on what worked in the past. Cooperrider (2018) notes, “Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them” (p. 3). A simple approach to organization change, AI begins with the “4-D” cycle. Selecting a topic the group is led through the four questions: Discovery (appreciating) “What gives life to the organization?”,

Dream (envisioning) “What might be?”, Design (co-constructing the future) “How can it be?”, Destiny (sustaining) “What will it be?” (Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D., Stavros, J., 2018).

AI provides another intervention for change agents. This intervention is known as SOAR. SOAR allows leaders to focus on what matters most, “the future of our people and organization” (p. 405) SOAR accomplishes this through an inventory of strategic inquiry and appreciates intent versus internal and external assessment. This process can allow leaders and facilitators to take an internal temperature of the individuals of the organization by learning about what drives the members based on their thoughts and values.

SOAR ensures the people develop by co-creating the future and desired results of the organization. SOAR begins with the AI tradition of inquiry of what works well in the organization. The members discuss and review the strengths of the organization, self, and values of the members. Cooperrider reports several benefits to strategic planning with AI, “self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-respect at the organizational level, improved organizational capacities and individual and functional capabilities, the creation of new knowledge that is practical and useful, acceptance of new relationships and responsibilities that will build strategic capacity at all levels” (p.403). The approach of AI is to attempt to move people through a change in a positive approach. Cooperrider (2008) notes, “A fundamental assumption underlying AI is that the language one uses creates one’s reality.” Rather than being defect focused and using language such as problem, concerns, etc. the leadership and change agents focus on the use of positive language to move people into a strengths-based mindset.

## **PSYCHOLOGY THEORY AND INTERVENTION**

### **Relational Frame Theory (RFT)**

What is a ‘dog’? What is ‘cute’? What is ‘happy’? What is ‘What’? RFT demonstrates the socially constructed creation of language and the fusion of language to the human experience. The meaning of the words creates thoughts and emotions which influence human responses to stimuli. RFT explains how language gives meaning in our lives and shapes our experiences. Understanding how humans *perceive and interpret* the world around us is important for organization development and alike fields to understand. RFT explains how language impacts individuals and leaders, and how organizations develop or perceive the external and internal events. The perspectives influence strategy, implementation, and finally outcomes. Language provides the meaning of thoughts. Thoughts are viewed as opinions, assumptions, and judgments. Rarely if ever are thoughts facts. Because language provides meaning to our lives,, we often become fused to thought and emotion.

In Figure 1.0 the relationship between language and stimuli, and how meaning is assigned to language is depicted. The word and sound “dog” has been assigned meaning by society thus linking has given the word “dog” meaning, linking it to the subject. There are several meanings we assign to dogs, from physical appearances, behavior, function, to what emotion they evoke in us. For this example, we work with the meaning of dogs are ‘cute.’

In this example (Figure 2.0), a dog biting an individual, the individual may link dogs to thoughts such as, “Dogs are bad” or “Dogs will hurt me” leading to the emotions of “scared” and/or “panic” and physical sensations such as body sweating, increased heart rate, and shakiness. Now, possibly dogs are paired with “bad”, “scary”, and physical sensations of panic. Whenever this individual comes into contact with a dog automatically the body will respond to thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations of panic. Now take this example and switch out “dog” for an emotion word. When we assign meaning to stimuli or experience our minds can begin to overproduce thoughts which are opinions, assumptions, and judgments yet we respond to the thoughts as though they are facts. Then we respond to the thoughts which may or may not be a reality, creating a perspective or belief that may not serve either the individual or organization.



Figure 1. The RFT Model, Relationship between language and stimuli adopted from the work of Steven Hayes (2006).

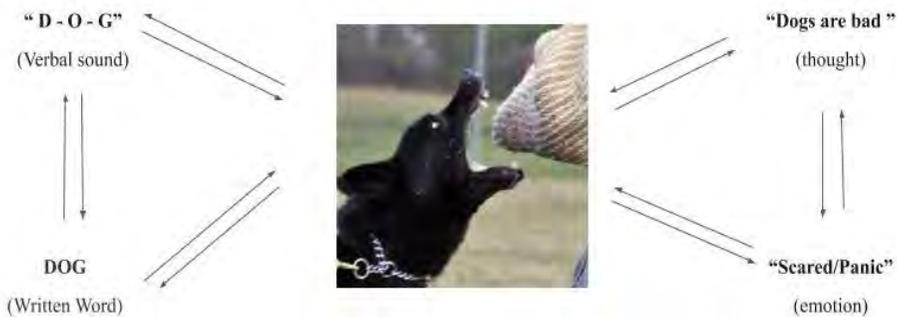


Figure 2. The RFT Model, Relationship between language and stimuli and pathology adopted from the work of Steven Hayes (2006).

## Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

In ACT the purpose is to gain or increase psychological flexibility which allows individuals to access the ability to defuse from thoughts and emotions by using mindfulness. As an observer of one's thoughts and emotions, we notice the thought as if they are clouds in the sky floating by. ACT teaches us that we cannot control nor change our thoughts however we can practice becoming neutral to thoughts. Often humans become fused to thoughts through language as we learn from RFT. People treat thoughts as if they are facts while thoughts are merely opinions, assumptions, and judgments. Defusing from the thoughts and emotions leads to the ability to understand the self as context, meaning 'I am' separate from my thoughts and emotions. I can have an experience, thoughts may come and go, and I get to choose how I respond to the thoughts/experience. Taking action in service of one's values is a key factor in ACT. However, this action is often uncomfortable at first leading to avoidance. ACT asks one to sit with the uncomfortable experience and take action.

When we are committed to taking action towards our values and choosing the behaviors in favor of the values the unuseful thoughts begin to decrease. ACT teaches us to better manage the environment in the present moment, mindfully, accepting as it is, defuse from thoughts, and commit to actions in line with their values. We cannot stop thoughts or emotions from occurring as a result of the stimulus. We also can't stop an unpleasant life experience from happening either. We can choose how to respond to the thoughts and emotions by having defined values and living in service of them by first recognizing and applying mindfulness.

The ACT Hexagram, Figure 3, demonstrates how the six domains (Acceptance, Defusion, Contact with The Present Moment, Self-as-Context, Values, Committed Action) of ACT are connected with Psychological Flexibility as the main focus of the therapeutic goal. Bond et al (2006) assert the following:

- 1) Defusion- People's experiences become enmeshed in the temporal and evaluation of relational networks and are targeted for change.

Experiential Avoidance – is the result of people spending time and energy trying to think, feel, remember and sense the “right” or “good” ways compared to the “wrong” or “bad” things.

- 2) Acceptance – One allows the experience to happen without attempts to alter. When one engages with the thought in a particular context it prevents psychology flexibility. By buying into the thought (Cognitive Fusion) then avoid the experience that brings about emotions/feelings. (Experiential Avoidance). Defusion and Acceptance helps one contact the present moment.

- 3) Contact with The Present Moment – People can become entangled in the evaluation and relating to the relation frames as a result of cognitive fusion and avoidance. One loses contact with the immediate physical and social environment and one's thoughts about the event. Through defusion and acceptance, one can gain access to the present moment increasing psychological flexibility.

- 4) Self-as-Context – It is the story we have created about ourselves over time. Observing Self or meta-awareness. Notice self in the present moment, “I/HERE/NOW.” This asks one to notice self in the moment.

- 5) Values – Are defined “as chosen qualities, action of patterns that one can work towards but never reach.” The values act as a compass or directive that motivates action. Clearly defined values help one be more flexible in events because the values act as a guild. When values are not clearly defined one is more likely to act in avoidance, or “looking good in someone else’s eyes” Acting on service of one value leads one to positive reinforcements.
- 6) Committed Action - ACT seeks to develop actions that led to value action behaviors and increase self-control according to (Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006). The development of concrete goals in specific areas and behavior linked to those goals that are more involved, border, and long term.

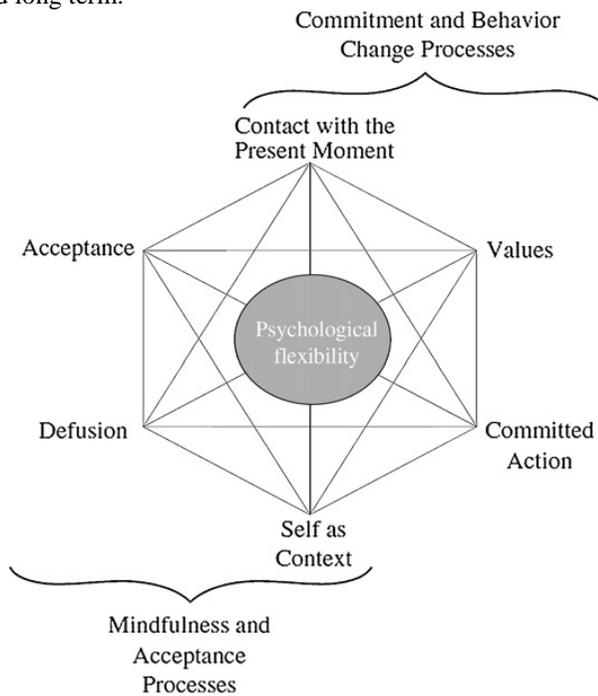


Figure 3. The ACT/RFT Model of Psychological Flexibility. From *Psychological Flexibility, ACT, and Organizational Behavior* by Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes (2006).

The Defusion Cycle, in Figure 4 presents ACT in action. Fusing with an experience prevents psychological flexibility because we take on the thought or emotion. For example, we often label ourselves to match the experience. People will say, “my depression” or “my anxiety.” We are not “depression” or “anxiety.” We are humans experiencing human experiences such as symptoms of depression and anxiety. This is not the practice of remaining neutral to the experience. Psychological Defusion asks people to notice thoughts and emotions and step outside of the experience by attempting a neutral stance to the experience followed by taking action in the service of values despite the uncomfortable experience.

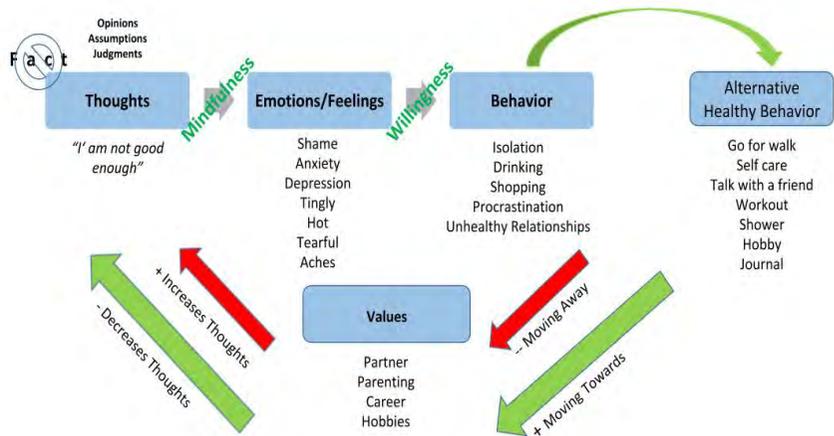


Figure 4. Defusion Cycle, adopted from RFT/ACT.

### The Common Thread and Future Research

Leaders are faced daily with leading people through ever-changing environments while also responsible for meeting goals to maintain a successful business. Organizational change research found, "The most common forms of emotional resistance were frustration, fear, distrust, and shock. The leading sources of emotional resistance were change burnout and fear of failure" (Day, 2017). Psychological flexibility is difficult if not impossible to access if people are emotionally entangled in frustration, fear, distrust, and shock. We have learned from Agility OD the most successful businesses are ones that have developed the ability to adjust to external demands and trends. This requires psychological flexibility or in OD known as "dynamic capability - the potential to sense opportunities and threats, solve problems, and change the firm's resources and processes (Worley et al., p. 27, 2014)."

Relational Frame Theory (RFT) teaches us people form relationships between language and stimuli, and the intensity and context of the correlation may lead to psychological pathology. Accordingly, to address emotional distress and behaviors, proponents of RFT advocate the use of ACT. ACT attempts to address human suffering through behavior and mindfulness practice in an effort to increase psychological flexibility and change. Bond, Hayes, and Barnes-Holmes (2006) states "Research suggests that an applied extension of RFT, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, has led to new interventions that increase psychological flexibility and, thereby enhance, organizational behavior and health (p. 25)." Furthermore, research has shown Relational Frame Theory (RFT) and Acceptance and Commitment Theory (ACT) impacts the psychological flexibility of workers; learning, productivity, job satisfaction. (Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes, 2006).

RFT reminds us of how language meaning can shift between individuals, society, and cultures. The meaning of one word can vary greatly among a small geographical distance. For example, towns and cities can have a range of meanings for certain words depending on who you ask. We find even in close relationships between two people such as a marriage or dating the people can

have two completely different meanings for words and how they interpret the meaning. When working globally or even in different geographic locations of one county mindfulness plays a role in how we communicate and express ourselves. The writer of this paper practiced mindfulness when choosing the words and avoided the use of slang, jargon, metaphors, and American expressions so the information could best be received and understood.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

We have seen several contemporary OD theories in this paper. Each can be traced back to language as the catalyst for the execution of the OD approach. The author would like to do additional research in OD which incorporates the behavioral sciences to develop upon existing theory. The exhaustive current OD theory fails to understand people at the most basic level. By having a working understanding of the behavioral sciences OD can strengthen current theory by using the knowledge to match the context. The author foresees building upon ACT by creating workplace and leader interventions. Beyond leaders asking the right questions and listening to what the people are saying they need to understand *why* this skill is so vital to organizations. Moving forward for OD scholar-practitioners, an area of future research to consider is that of evaluating the language of leaders, the language used within organizations and its correlation to culture and climate, and finally, applications of ACT in organizations as an approach to change management.

## **REFERENCES**

- Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In V. S. Ramachaudran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of human behavior* (Vol. 4, pp. 71-81). New York: Academic Press. (Reprinted in H. Friedman [Ed.], *Encyclopedia of mental health*. San Diego: Academic Press, 1998).
- Biglan, A., & Barnes-Holmes, Y. (2015). Acting in light of the future: How do future-oriented cultural practices evolve and how can we accelerate their evolution? *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, 4(3), 184–195.
- Bond, F. W., Lloyd, J., & Guenole, N. (2013). The work-related acceptance and action questionnaire: Initial psychometric findings and their implications for measuring psychological flexibility in specific contexts. *Journal Of Occupational & Organizational Psychology*, 86(3), 331-347.
- Bond, Hayes & Barnes-Holmes (2006). Psychological Flexibility, ACT, and Organizational Behavior, *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, 26:1-2, 25-54
- Bushe, G. R. (2019). *The Dynamics of Generative Change*. North Vancouver, BC: Bushe-Marshak Institute.
- Bushe, G. R., & Marshak, R. J. (Eds.). (2015). *Dialogic Organization Development: The Theory and Practice of Transformational Change* (1st ed.). Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers
- Bushe, G.R. & Marshak, R.J. (2014b). The dialogic mindset in organization development. *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, 22, 55-97.

- Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D., Stavros, J. (2008). *The Appreciative inquiry handbook for leaders of change* (2nd ed). ISBN: 978-1576754931
- Cooperrider, D. & McQuaid, M. (2018). *Your change blueprint how to design & deliver an ai summit*. VIC: Publisher.
- Cooperrider, D. (2017, October 27). *The new change equation for the discovery and design of positive institutions harnessing the spirit of appreciative inquiry*. Lecture presented in Benedictine University, Lisle, IL.
- Cooperrider, D. L., Sorensen, P. F., Jr., Yaeger, T. F., & Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative Inquiry Foundations in Positive Organization Development*. Champaign, IL: Stripes.
- Day, A. M. (2017). *Investigating emotional resistance to organizational change: A descriptive qualitative research study of local television newsroom leaders* (Order No. 10284160). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Fletcher, L., & Hayes, S. C. (2005). Relational frame theory, acceptance and commitment therapy, and a functional analytic definition of mindfulness. *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, 23(4), 315–336.
- Frykman, M., Hasson, H., Athlin, Å. M., & von Thiele Schwarz, U. (2014). Functions of behavior change interventions when implementing multi-professional teamwork at an emergency department: a comparative case study. *BMC health services research*, 14, 218. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6963-14-218>
- Hayes, S. C., Luoma, J. B., Bond, F. W., Masuda, A., & Lillis, J. (2006). Acceptance and commitment therapy: Model, processes and outcomes. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 44(1), 1–25.
- Hayes, D. Barnes-Holmes, & B. Roche (Eds.), *Relational frame theory: A post-Skinnerian account of human language and cognition*. (pp. 197–209). New York, NY: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Hayes, S. C., Luoma, J., Bond, F. W., Masuda, A., & Lillis, J. (2016). Acceptance and commitment therapy: Model, processes, and outcomes. In S. C. Hayes (Ed.), *The act in context: The canonical papers of Steven C. Hayes*. (pp. 249–279). New York, NY: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Lemay, E., Pitts, J.A. & Gordon, P. (2007) *Heidegger for beginners*. New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc., 1994.
- Minaham, M, (2018), *OD From the Founders to the Future* [PDF document]. Retrieved from Benedictine Contemporary Trends Lecture Series
- Roche, B., Barnes-Holmes, D., Barnes-Holmes, Y., & Hayes, S. C. (2001). Social processes. In S. C.