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A translational approach to the functional analysis of language in psychotherapy



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Abstract The functional analysis of verbal behavior has been successful in establishing basic and advanced forms of language in individuals with developmental disabilities. The development of behavioral approaches to psychotherapy, such as the functional-analytic psychotherapy, have advanced the implementation of operant analyses of verbal behavior among typical adults. The field of behavior-analytic approaches to psychotherapy departs from the applied experimental research in behavior analysis in various ways: (a) minimal use of molecular analyses of behavioral processes using single-subject experimentation, (b) confined use of functional analysis and function-driven intervention, and (c) metaphoric use of mainstream behavioral concepts and methods. The breakthroughs brought about by behavioral approaches to psychotherapy may be supplemented by way of translating some of the findings of the applied experimental literature. The present analysis illustrates how behavioral processes demonstrated in the context of experimental research, often with individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities, may be relevant to psychotherapy with typically-developed adults. This translational approach is discussed with reference to basic language processes: echoics, mands, tacts, and intraverbal dynamics. This approach could prompt programmatic translational research in the field of behavioral psychotherapies.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Conducta verbal;
Psicoterapia;

Un enfoque traslacional aplicado al análisis funcional del lenguaje en psicoterapia

Resumen El análisis funcional de la conducta verbal ha alcanzado un éxito notable en el establecimiento de operantes verbales básicas y avanzadas en personas con trastornos del desarrollo. El avance de aproximaciones conductuales a la psicoterapia, tales como la psicoterapia analítico-funcional, ha impulsado la aplicación de análisis operantes a la conducta

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verbal en adultos. Las psicoterapias analítico-conductuales se diferencian de la investigación experimental aplicada en análisis de conducta en varios aspectos: (a) ausencia de análisis moleculares de procesos conductuales usando metodología experimental de caso único, (b) uso limitado del análisis funcional y la intervención funcional, y (c) uso metafórico de conceptos y métodos clásicos. Los avances favorecidos por las psicoterapias conductuales podrían enriquecerse mediante la transferencia de resultados de investigación procedentes de la investigación aplicada experimental. El presente análisis ilustra cómo procesos conductuales demostrados en el contexto de la investigación experimental con personas con trastornos del desarrollo y discapacidad intelectual pueden ser relevantes a población adulta con desarrollo típico y pueden conducir a la transferencia de resultados entre ambas áreas. Nuestro análisis se centra en procesos verbales básicos que incluyen la ecoica, el mando, el tacto y las dinámicas intraverbales. Este enfoque podría facilitar el desarrollo de investigación programática traslacional en el ámbito de las psicoterapias conductuales.

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In our daily life we access what we wish by direct physical engagement with our environment: we open a tap to obtain water, sit on a chair to rest our legs, cover our ears to protect ourselves from noise, and so forth. However, direct interaction with the physical environment accounts only for a fraction of operant human behavior. Specifically, we frequently achieve desirable outcomes through the mediation of others: we send e-mails expecting them to be read, we knock on doors in order to be let in, ask for favors, confess sins, and the like. Operant behavior maintained by the mediation of other people has been often acknowledged as a definition of verbal behavior (Skinner, 1957). Behavioral psychotherapies such as functional-analytic psychotherapy and acceptance and commitment therapy present verbal behavior as any other form of operant behavior maintained ultimately by gaining access to reinforcing consequences (e.g., Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999; Kohlenberg & Tsai, 1991; Luciano, Páez-Blarrina, & Valdivia-Salas, 2010).

For example, highly intense crying by a baby may be maintained by the food, comfort, and attention provided by her mother contingent upon intense crying. Similarly, the delusional statements of a client diagnosed with schizophrenia may be maintained by the responses of his social environment (e.g., attention from caregivers). Numerous empirical studies have validated specific aspects of the functional analysis of verbal behavior as originally presented by Skinner (1957). This body of evidence has primarily focused on the acquisition of basic verbal operants in individuals with language delays and, to a lesser extent, the acquisition of verbal operants in children of typical development (Greer & Ross, 2008; Virues-Ortega & Miguel, 2013).

There are behavioral approaches to adult psychotherapy that make extensive use of behavioral concepts. Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) presents the avoidance of aversive private stimuli (i.e., experiential avoidance) as a distinct behavioral function of multiple clinical disorders (Hayes et al., 1999). Likewise, functional-analytic psychotherapy (FAP) promotes the use of clinical observation in the context of client-therapist interaction as the basis for in-session functional analyses and real-time

implementation of social consequences upon clinically-relevant behaviors (Kohlenberg & Tsai, 1991). These approaches to psychotherapy have made extraordinary headway in the last 15 years. Yet, they present specific limitations. First, they have produced significant outcome literature, but limited process literature to validate the mechanisms that these interventions are said to mobilize. For example, the concept of verbal shaping in the context of verbal interaction between the client and the therapist has not been demonstrated using single-subject experimental evaluations for FAP. Second, their approach to the functional analysis of clinically-relevant behaviors is limited to specific behavior processes: derived responding and experiential avoidance in the case of ACT and within-session client-therapist interactions in the case of FAP. The standpoint introduced here attempts to supplement these approaches.

The verbal behavior and functional analysis literatures of individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities have in large part, developed independently from clinical behavior analysis (Virues-Ortega & Miguel, 2013; Virues-Ortega, Rodríguez, & Yu, 2014; Wightman, Julio, & Virues-Ortega, 2014). The intent of the present conceptual analysis is to illustrate how the corpus of evidence of the applied experimental literature in the field of behavior analysis presents opportunities for clinical behavior analysis. This approach could expand our understanding of the functional relations and verbal behavior dynamics occurring in clinical contexts.

In this article, we will illustrate this translational approach by focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on the experimental research on language acquisition from the applied behavior analysis literature. For the purposes of brevity and didactic simplicity, we will discuss only fundamental verbal processes. The main aim of this analysis is to promote greater interaction between the various branches of behavior analysis. This approach is based on clinical observations and not on empirical research. Thus we will refrain from making direct recommendations. A fully translational study would require confirmation of the hypotheses presented here as a conceptual analysis.

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