



## Empirical research

# Measuring self and rules in what people say: exploring whether self-discrimination predicts long-term wellbeing

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 17 January 2014

Received in revised form

28 April 2016

Accepted 9 May 2016

## Keywords:

Self

Mixed method research

Identity

Epistemology

Psychological flexibility

Qualitative research

## ABSTRACT

Relational Frame Theory views the self as verbal discrimination of one's own behavior using deictic framing. We coded interviews similar to those occurring in therapy sessions for occurrences of a conceptualized, experiential or observing sense of self as well as values-oriented or control-oriented self-rules. We then used the frequencies of these different forms of self-discrimination to predict wellbeing 6 and 12 months later. Participants were legal and medical professionals who completed a range of wellbeing measures as well as interviews exploring their emotional and epistemic responses to personal life events. Two self-discrimination behaviors, reflecting values-oriented self-rules and self-as-context, predicted wellbeing 6 and 12 months later. While exploratory, this study suggests that the ways people discriminate their own behavior in natural language is a reliable determinant of wellbeing over extended periods. This approach provides researchers and clinicians with an additional tool for understanding and working with identity and psychological flexibility.

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## 1. Introduction

In this study we use a contextual-behavioral account of self to explore whether long-term wellbeing is predicted by the way a person talks about themselves and what they care about. Our interest in this approach stemmed from our efforts to understand the effects of mindfulness training upon the flexibility and authenticity of participant's sense of self. Our longer term aim is to develop and validate a behavioral approach to measuring changes in self-discrimination resulting from mindfulness training, therapy or other behavior change interventions.

The behavior of talking about the self and its experiences is at the very core of psychology and modern society more generally. But there are widely varying views regarding the nature of the self (e. g. [Gallagher, 2011](#); [Leary & Tangney, 2012](#)). From the very earliest beginnings of psychology ([James, 1890/1950](#)), there has been a distinction between a sense of a "me" that is conceptualized and an "I" that is in process and is experiential. Most empirical studies of self within psychology have focused upon the conceptualized self, including studies of self-awareness, self-esteem and identity ([Harter, 2012](#)). The modal view is of the self as an object that has attributes, roles and traits that can be conceptualized. Witness the

huge number of self-report instruments developed within psychology to map an almost endless variety of psychological constructs based upon conceptualizations of the self.

From the contextual-behavioral perspective, such theorizing can be problematic if it ignores the ontogeny of self and assumes the self is an entity. A theory of self must be consistent with empirical research regarding development of self during childhood and explain the functional role of language in constructing a sense of self. In this paper, we present a dynamic view of self as linguistically constructed, and link that process to long-term wellbeing.

## 2. A contextual behavioral account of self

From a behavioral perspective, to "self" is to verbally discriminate one's own behavior. This behavior is strongly reinforced by our social community ([Skinner, 1976](#)). A prototypical, non-verbal form of this behavior can be found in pigeons who are able to 'report' on their previous behavior by differentially pecking keys ([Skinner, 1953](#)). But in humans, this capacity to discriminate and classify one's own behavior is vastly more complex. As children we are continually reinforced for being able to appropriately report "I want ...", "I am ...", "I know ..." and so on. According to [Skinner \(1976\)](#), the self is "a repertoire of behavior imparted by an organized set of contingencies". That is, we construct a sense of self in response to the functional demands of social interactions and "it is

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only when a person's private world becomes important to others that it is made important to him" (Skinner, 1976, p. 35).

Relational Frame Theory (RFT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) extend Skinner's operant account by describing the verbal behaviors associated with creating and maintaining a sense of self. RFT views all human cognition as the act of relating events or experiences (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001). The infinite generativity of human language arises from our capacity to infer relations between anything, even arbitrary symbols, and to make use of many different types of relation, such as evaluative (better/worse), hierarchical (part of/includes), conditional (causal/if ... then) and temporal (before/after) relations. This unique human ability to relate arbitrary cues allows us to step outside the realm of direct sensory experience, formulate a past and a future, and use those formulations to create meaning and solve problems. However, this ability also creates human suffering as we remember unpleasant experiences, compare our situations to those who are better off, and fearfully anticipate possible futures.

From the perspective of RFT, the evolution of a sense of self corresponds to learning to derive and appropriately use the relational terms I/YOU, HERE/THERE and NOW/THEN. Consistent with Skinner's account, these "deictic" (Hayes et al., 2001) frames are generalized operants acquired through naturalistic multiple exemplar training responding to questions such as "What are you doing now?", "Where are you going then?", "What do you want?" and so on. Unlike other relational frames, deictic frames must be abstracted from a particular point of view: The individual child must begin to notice and abstract the experience of the I/HERE/NOW reporting on experience that is distinct from YOU/THERE/THEN. THERE is anywhere other than HERE and HERE is always from this point of view (Hayes, 1984). It is easy to see how difficult it is to learn this sort of deictic relational framing by noticing how young children frequently make errors of perspective taking. A child might mistakenly report what they ate for breakfast when asked what their brother ate (Hayes, 1984) or they may mistakenly believe an absent observer would know where a hidden doll is located because they themselves know (Doherty, 2012). It takes repeated exposure to social contingencies to successfully apply deictic terms.

Theorists using RFT thus see the evolving self as the process of bringing one's verbal self-discriminations into increasingly complex verbal relations with other aspects of experience. Deictic framing in combination with other forms of increasingly complex relational framing allows the establishment of three senses of self: self as the *content* of verbal relations, self as an ongoing *process* of verbal relations and self as the *context* of verbal relations (Hayes, 1995). Furthermore, such deictic framing allows for the derivation of self-rules regarding how one should behave in certain contexts in order for certain consequences to occur. In the next sections we describe these different senses of self and self-rules.

However, before proceeding we wish to make our assumptions clear regarding the ontological status of mixed methods research (i.e. using both qualitative statements and quantitative summaries) for investigating psychological flexibility processes. The work described herein uses topography of language to infer function. While we recognize that this is not the same thing as a functional analysis which requires experimental manipulation of antecedent conditions, we see our work as functional *assessment* akin to the process of inferring function from client statements as described by Ramnero, and Torneke (2008). As therapists, and even often as researchers, we are not often in a position to directly experimentally manipulate behavior and we must instead rely upon statements by our clients and research participants to infer the functions of their behavior. This work generates predictions that could be tested experimentally, however our purpose here is not to

provide a comprehensive, experimentally-based account in RFT terms. Rather it is to further illustrate the functional utility of mid-level terms that are widely used in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) but which are founded in the contextual behavioral account of human verbal behavior. We do not seek to reify terms like "self-as-story" or self-rules as mental constructs causing behavior, rather we wish to explore and demonstrate the functionality of these classes of self-discriminatory behavior as indicators of psychological flexibility and as predictors of wellbeing. With that said, we now describe three senses of self and the notion of self-rules.

### 2.1. Self-as-Story [SS]

Within ACT, self-as-story refers to the conceptualized self. This sense of self has also previously been referred to as self-as-content (Barnes-Holmes, Hayes, & Dymond, 2001). However here we follow Torneke (2010) and call it self-as-story simply so the abbreviation [SS] is not confused with self-as-context. Self-as-story is where the person describes, evaluates, explains and understands the self using conceptualizations abstracted from the ongoing flow of experience. Example statements that we inferred might reflect self-as-story included: "I am an introvert" or "I am a fantastic public speaker" or "I have always been insecure."

While having a conceptualized self is socially reinforced, self-as-story can be unhelpful because the conceptualizations become disconnected from the ongoing flow of experience and become rigidly insensitive to context (Foody, Barnes-Holmes, & Barnes-Holmes, 2012). For example, a person who conceptualizes themselves as introverted may have difficulty recognizing or remembering their own extroverted behavior, or they may avoid potentially stressful social situations and come to live in an increasingly insular world. Self-as-story is just a tiny, abstracted remnant of the totality of our experience. As such, "ACT seeks to undermine the conceptualized self – that is, an attachment to a literal conception of who we are – on the same grounds that it seeks to undermine attachment to any specific thought: that such attachment is unnecessary and unhelpful. A phrase used in ACT that characterized its posture toward the conceptualized self is, "Kill yourself every day" (Hayes, 2002, p. 64). For ACT therapists it is important to be able to spot rigid conceptualizations of the self and understand their impacts. We believe our criteria for coding self-as-story may help with identifying such rigidity.

### 2.2. Self-as-Process [SP]

Self-as-process is the knowing or experiencing self. Torneke (2010, p. 107) described it as, "the ongoing, observable process of ourselves: behavior that is occurring in the moment and that makes up part of what each of us calls myself – feelings, memories, bodily sensations, and thoughts. It always exists here and now." Like self-as-story, self-as-process behavior is socially functional. Statements like "I am happy", "I'm hungry" or "My stomach is hurting" provide useful and predictive information to others. Being able to monitor our experience is also the basis of successful self-regulation.

Self-as-process is frequently seen as synonymous with describing the present moment. Indeed, Foody et al. (2012) discuss substituting self-as-process for "contact with the present moment" as a core process in ACT. However, self-as-process can include recalling past experience. The "behavior that is occurring in the moment" (Torneke, 2010, p. 107) is ongoing self-discrimination not the contents of that discrimination. Recalling a past event can still be self-as-process as long as that process is flexible, responsive to context and relatively defused (Foody et al., 2012).

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