



Wielding the Double Edged Sword

Using language with intention and purpose in psychotherapy



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All psychological interventions rely on the power of language.

Theory is where art and science merge



Language is the learned behavior of building and responding to symbolic relations.

Relating is simply responding to one thing in terms of another



Symbolic relations *frame* the way we experience objects and events.



Symbolic relations are at the core of all human mental concepts

memory meaning consciousness purpose
feelings authenticity self-awareness belief
intention faith relationship understanding
emotion inspiration spirituality wisdom
belongingness free-will compassion trust
self-direction empathy actualization dignity

**So therapists can ignore language,
but we can't avoid it.**

Reflecting on Practice

REFLECTING ON PRACTICE



How might language be imbuing meaning or influencing you and your client when you....

- sit in silence?
- practice mindfulness?
- express emotion without words?

Language is not logical, it's psychological.



Reflecting on Practice

REFLECTING ON PRACTICE



What logical strategies are you and your client engaging in that are not working?

How has a logical explanation of behavior or change strategy interfered with achieving therapy goals?

Language works only by expansion, not subtraction.



Reflecting on Practice

REFLECTING ON PRACTICE



What are you and your client adding to the language context that is strengthening problematic meaning or influence?

What can you and your client add to the language context that can alter the meaning or influence in helpful ways?

Using Language to Change Behavior



- Regulate emotion
- Stabilize mood
- Modify beliefs
- Disrupt habits

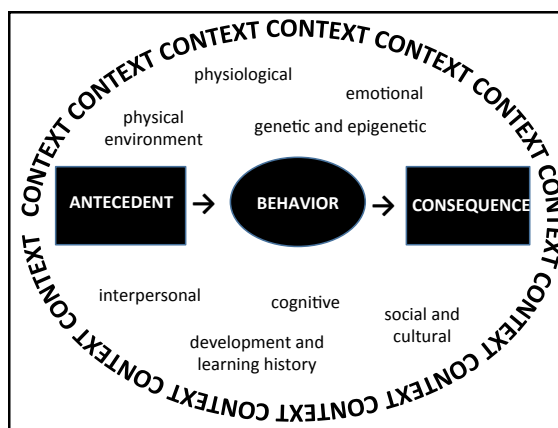
Using Language to Strengthen Behavior



- Build motivation
- Develop persistence
- Overcome barriers
- Increase generalizability

All you need to do is focus on two things: **context** and **function**.

(...and you thought RFT was complicated)



Orienting to Context and Function

What aspects of the context is the client attending to? What functions are dominant?

What does the therapist do to alter the context? How does that impact function?

Relational frames are tools for altering the context

Coordination Framing • = •

I **am** stupid.
 This workshop **is** useless.
 Crying **means** weakness.
 Rejection **is like** death.
 Forgiving **is a sign of** weakness.
 Anxiety **is** overwhelming.

Coordination Framing • = •

"I" framed in coordination with thoughts and feelings

Alexithymia

Evaluations become equivalent to the things evaluated



Noticing and describing with precision

Facilitates communication

Better self-regulation

Distinction Framing • ≠ ○

I'm **not** smart.
 It **is different** for girls.
 Telling jokes **is unlike** me.
 Passing **is not the same** as succeeding.
 Her smile **doesn't mean** she likes me.

Distinction Framing • ≠ ○

Distinction that leads to isolation or specialness

Distinction that leads to dismissing feedback ("yeah, but...")



Noticing and describing with precision

Reduces overgeneralization

Oppositional Framing

Someone **like** me could **never** do that.
 My depression **prevents** me from leaving the house.
 I **can't** go to the party. I'm **too** anxious.
 I want to be kind, **but** I'm so angry.

Oppositional Framing

Psychological experiences framed in opposition to values and goals

Attachment evokes loss, pleasure evokes pain



Transforming barriers into opportunities for action

Discovering meaning in pain


Comparative Framing ● < ●●

Being alone is **better than** being rejected.
 This is the **worst** day ever.
 This time was **not as bad as** last time.
 Why can't I be **more** confident?
 Everyone is **happier than** me.

Comparative Framing ● < ●●

Comparisons that fuel dissatisfaction, envy, shame

Comparisons that lead to evaluation or devaluation



Noticing and describing with precision

Evaluating effectiveness

Discovering meaning


Conditional Framing ● + ○ = ●○

If I stop worrying **then** something terrible could happen.
 I'll get sick **if** I stop washing.
Given how smart I am, I should be more successful.
 I should be stronger **because** I'm a man.
What will happen **if** you quit your job?
 I drink **in order to** forget.

Conditional Framing ● + ○ = ●○

Satisfaction that's conditional on controlling the uncontrollable

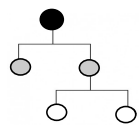
Incomplete or inaccurate descriptions of contingencies



Evaluating effectiveness

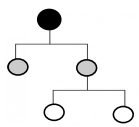
Normalizing and validating responses

Hierarchical Framing ●




My stuttering is **part of** the problem.
 Includes
 How would that **contribute to** your family's well-being?
 I'm **having** the thought that...
 That's just **one of** my many flaws.

Hierarchical Framing ●



Overgeneralization through mislabeling

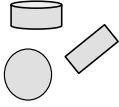


Resolving conflicts or opposition

Flexible and stable sense of self

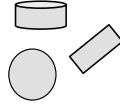

Establishing meaning and motivation

Deictic Framing



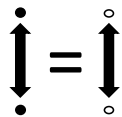
If I were **you**, I'd feel terrible.
 When you are 80 and look back at this moment, what will you think about your decision?
 Are you looking **at** your thoughts or **from** your thoughts?
 What do you think Michele Obama would do in this situation?

Deictic Framing

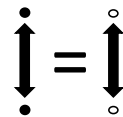

Poor social skills	Psychological distancing
Weak self-awareness	Empathy and Compassion
Rigid or unstable sense of self	Flexible sense of self

Analogical Framing



Rejection feels like all the air is sucked in out of the room.
 Life is a journey.
 How is this like that?
 My anger is tying me up in knots.
 Does that feeling remind you of anything?

Analogical Framing

Catastrophizing	Experiential learning
Overgeneralizing	Generalization of therapy ←→ real life

Practice is Not Performance

Play at Your Edge	Hit Sour Notes	Try it, Taste it Tweak it
		

Recognizing Types of Relational Framing

- Attend to client framing that suggests inflexibility
- Attend to specific frames the therapist uses to alter context
- Look for signs of transformed function in the client

This is your 6th session with Anne

- OCD with fears of contamination
- Avoids touching people or objects in public spaces
- Avoids restrooms other than her own, which has led to urinary and bowel problems
- Wears sanitized gloves and uses hand sanitizer to the point of mild tissue damage
- Tries to neutralizes thoughts by telling herself that there isn't any real risk of contamination
- Covert avoidance during in-session exposure
- Not engaging in exposure outside of session

How would you...

- Alter the context with no additional framing (e.g. posture shift, pace and tone of voice)
- Shift from opposition to coordination (e.g. *and* vs *but*)
- Opposition (e.g. irreverence, humor, paradox)
- Hierarchical framing (e.g. labeling thoughts as thoughts, pain as part of valued action)
- Analogy and metaphor (e.g. physicalizing, personifying)
- Perspective taking (e.g. psychological distancing)

Increasing Flexible Context Sensitivity

Increasing Flexible Context Sensitivity

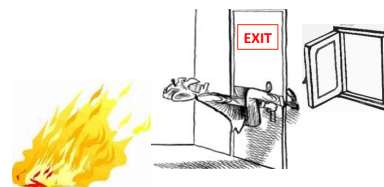
- Behaving in a way that is consistent with verbal constructions can have positive effects
- However, it can also lead to problematic insensitivity
- The clinical question: how to increase an individual's ability to attend to multiple features of the context and related functions and consequences?

The Up-side of Insensitivity



Persistence in spite of challenges in the moment
Satisfaction in the face of pain

The Down-Side of Insensitivity

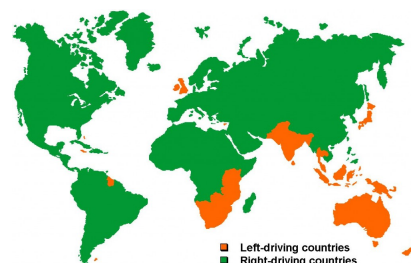


Responses become overgeneralized and resistant to change

Examples of insensitivity to context

- Example of useful insensitivity: self
- Example of problematic insensitivity: self
- Example of useful insensitivity: client
- Example of problematic insensitivity: client

→ Flexible sensitivity to the context



Broadening the Context

Broadening the Context




Slightly more personal practice

- In groups of 3, take turns being the speaker, the questioner, and the observer
- Speaker spends a few minutes describing a current challenging situation (either personal or clinical)
- Questioner spends a few minutes asking questions to try to flesh out the context in as many areas as possible
- Observer spends a few minutes sharing what they noticed and identifying other areas of context that could have been attended to
- Switch X2 (we will cue the switches)

It's not all about expanding

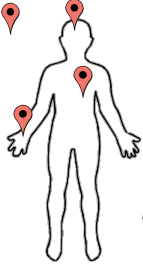
- When you want a behavior to change: consider adding functions by deliberately expanding the context
- When you want a behavior to persist or be maintained: consider augmenting the most relevant functions, not just expanding
- How does this all relate to useful and problematic insensitivity?

Influence context sensitivity by mapping language to experience



OBSERVING DESCRIBING TRACKING

Influence context sensitivity: evoke observation of experience



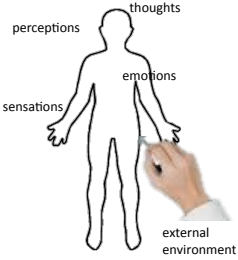
Nonverbal orienting

- Tactile cues
- Visual cues
- Auditory cues

Verbal orienting

- Space and time
- Analogy
- Perspective taking

Influence context sensitivity: evoke description of experience



Shift from evaluating to describing

- Naming
- Neutral labeling


If client gets stuck

- Analogy
- Perspective Taking

More precision and nuance

- Distinction
- Comparison

Influence context sensitivity: evoke tracking of contingencies



Specify complete contingency

- Antecedent
- Behavior
- Consequence

Discover hidden contingencies


- Analogy
- Perspective Taking

Draw out additional consequences


- Over time
- Other domains

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

-- Victor Frankl

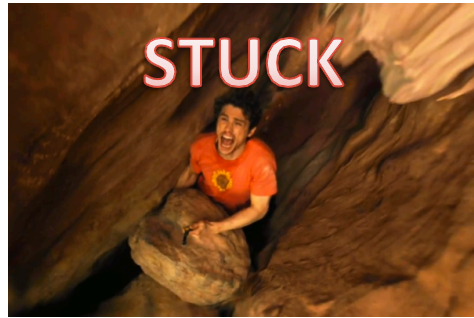
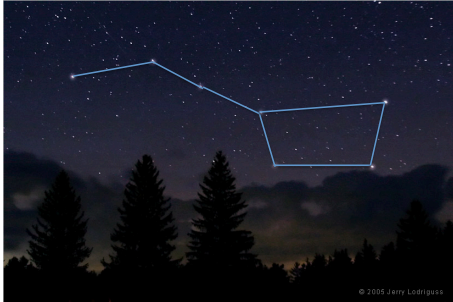


Context sensitivity



Coherence

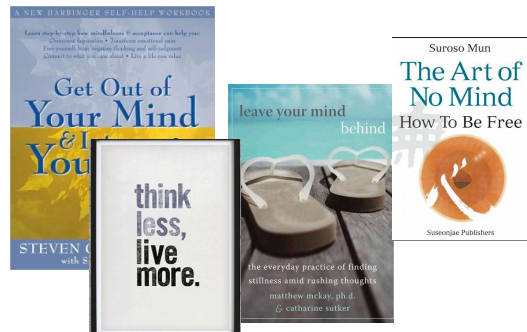
We organize our experiences into networks.



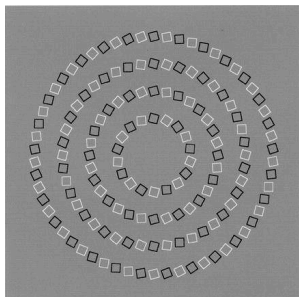
Where are you stuck?

- Think of **one behavior** that you have been trying to change without success
- **Why** have you not changed so far?

Stuck getting out of your mind?



Hmm...



Ok, so let's use our mind, then...



But to use it well, we need to know how it works.

Language is coherent (for a good reason).

A=B

B=?

It doesn't make sense. Really?



"I carry a log - yes. Is it funny to you? It is not to me. Behind all things are reasons. Reasons can even explain the absurd."

-- The log lady, Twin Peaks.

It *always* makes sense.

But coherence can be misguided

→ Essential coherence



But coherence can be misguided

→ Social coherence



Undermining making sense and reason giving?



That would make sense!
Oops...

Here is a better idea.

→ Functional coherence

- Need good context sensitivity
- Need relational flexibility
- Need some essential coherence
- Can use some social coherence



How to influence coherence?

Try this...



Another approach



- Relational flexibility
- Values
- Normalization
- Tracking
- Flexible self

Relational flexibility

• **Coordination**

What else could it be?

• **Distinction**

Is it different from...?

• **Comparison**

Is it more...? Less...?

• **Condition**

What would happen if...?

• **Deictic**

If you were in her shoes...?

One week from now...?

• **Hierarchy**

Could it be part of something?

• **Analogy**

Is it like...?

Dealing with meaninglessness



Finding meaning

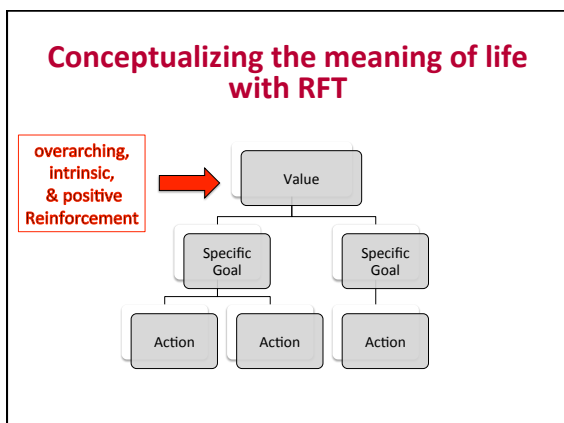
"The very meaninglessness of life forces man to create his own meaning"

-- Stanley Kubrick



That behavior you want to change...

Why is it **important for you** to change that behavior?



Building values

- **Hierarchical/conditional/comparative framing**
 - What is this action part of?
 - And if you did that, then what difference would it make?
 - Why this particular goal rather than another?
- **Distinction/opposition framing**
 - What if nobody knew? What if ___ (symptom) was not a problem?
- **Deictic framing**
 - Let's go back to a time when you were happy.
 - Who is the famous person you like most? What do you like about their personality, about what they stand for?

Mark is depressed

- 40 year-old; single; no children.
- Used to work in a bank. Lost his job 2 months ago.
- Spends days watching TV and sleeping on the couch.
- Believes that nothing is meaningful, that people lie to convince themselves that they are happy.

“Life is a cruel joke.”

Dealing with incoherence

Why do I do react this way?



I shouldn't feel this way.

→ Normalization

“Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood.”

-- Marie Curie



That behavior you want to change...

How is it that current problematic behavior **normal** and **justified**?

→ Normalization

- **Coordination framing**
 - *That's perfectly normal*
- **Conditional framing**
 - *It makes sense given the circumstances*
 - *What benefits does this bring to you?*
- **Deictic framing**
 - *If I were in your situation I would feel the same way...*

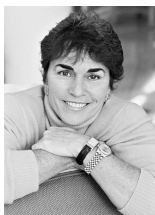
Dealing with “poor judgment”



→ Tracking

“Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment.”

-- Rita Mae Brown



That behavior you want to change...

What happens **as a result of** that **current** problematic behavior?

What happens/would happen **as a result of** the **alternative** behavior?

→ Tracking

- **Conditional framing**
 - *What happens when you do ____?*
- **Comparative framing**
 - *What happens when you do ____ instead?*
- **Hierarchical framing**
 - *Which option is most in line with what you care about?*

Jane's dilemma

- 32 year-old client.
- Had an argument with her sister 2 years ago and hasn't talked to her since then.
- Would like to reconnect with her but is afraid of being rejected.

“I don't know if I'll ever have the courage to talk to her.”

Dealing with rigidity and instability



→ Flexible Self

"Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another."

-- Toni Morrison



That behavior you want to change...

What would be **different** / **the same** about you if you changed that behavior?

→ Flexible Self

- **Deictic framing**
 - *Can you see this thought? Can you see that you see it?*
- **Distinction framing**
 - *If you can see it, then can you be your thought?*
- **Hierarchical framing**
 - *What if your thought was a part of you, and you were more than your thoughts?*
- **Conditional framing**
 - *What difference would it make to have thoughts instead of being thoughts?*

Getting unstuck (epilogue)



Using, creating, and delivering METAPHORS

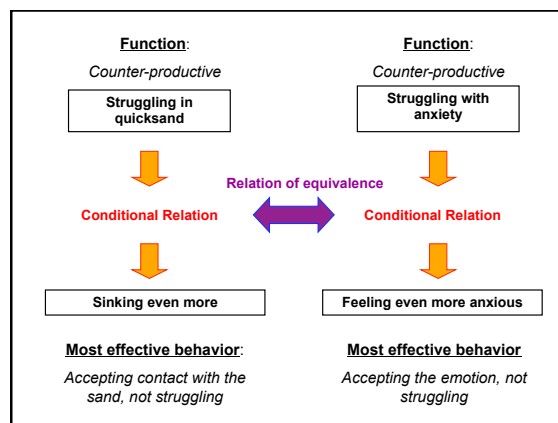


Using metaphors... Why?

Metaphor is a form of alteration of the context that transforms functions.

It increases our sensitivity to parts of the context we were missing.

Which leads us to reconsider the way we conceptualize the world.



How to choose and build metaphors

- Find a good functional match between the metaphor and the client's situation
- Find a metaphor that uses the client's culture

Clinical example

- Joe works is a carpenter. He builds houses.
- Joe is depressed.
- When he feels depressed, he withdraws and then feels even more depressed.

Choose or build a metaphor for Joe

- Quicksand metaphor? Feeding the tiger?
- Why not, but let's use Joe's culture.
- Let's find a situation that matches the **counter productivity** of withdrawing. Something that seems to make sense but actually has problematic consequences.
- Maybe:
Building a fancier house than the others in the same neighborhood to increase its value.

