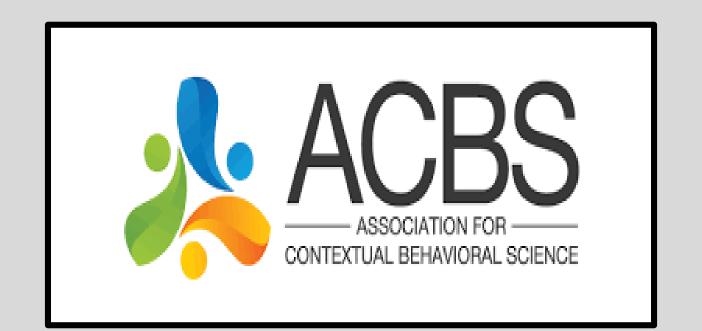


The Anti-ACT: How Organizations Sustain Systems of Psychological Inflexibility



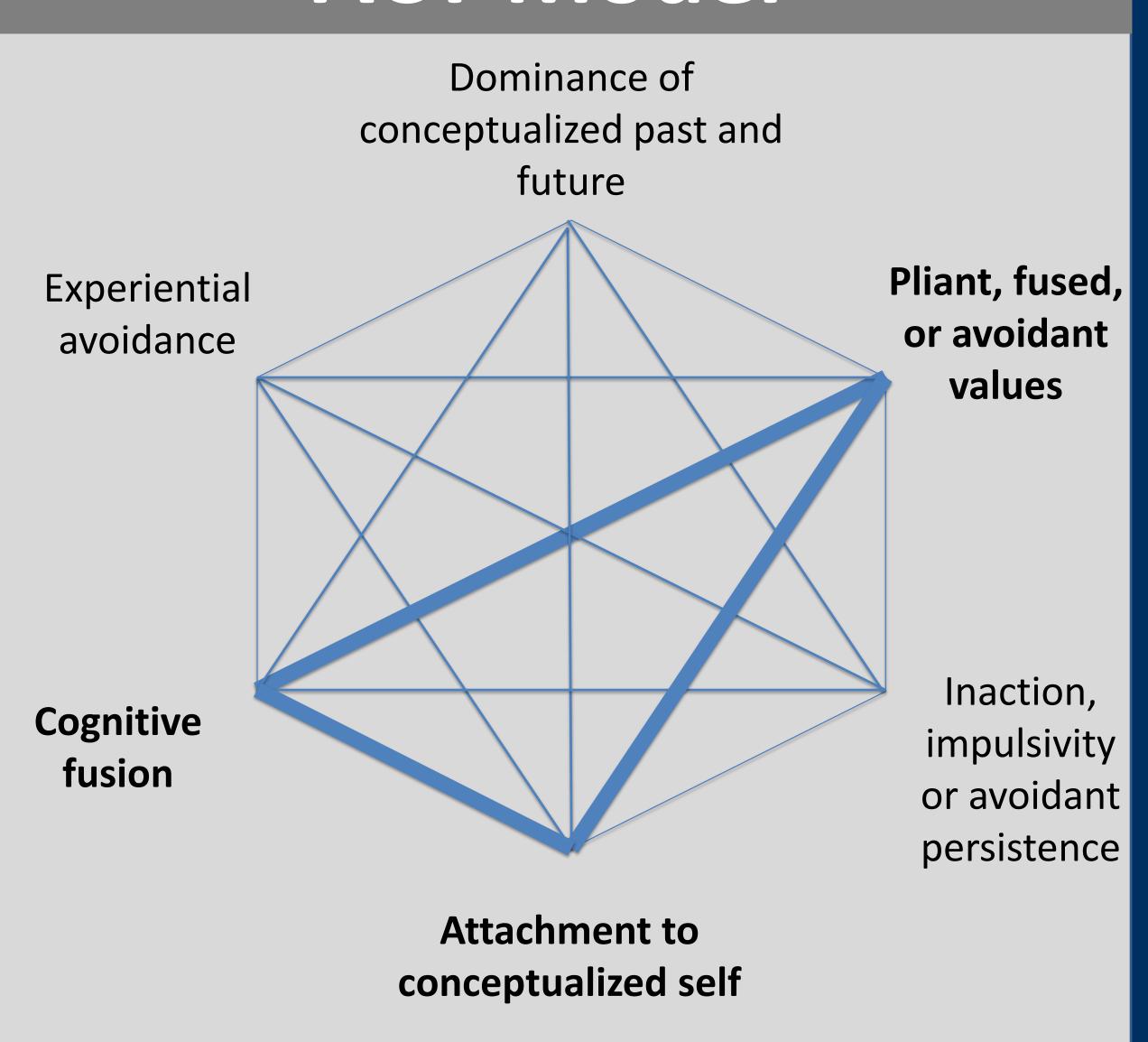
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Introduction

- Research supports the use of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) in addressing wellness challenges within organizations (Bond et al., 2006; Hayes et al., 2006).
- However, few reports examine how organizations (cults, political groups, etc.) engage in practices that support or decrease psychological flexibility in their members.
- We provide an *interactional flexibility* model to examine how organizational values may lead to deleterious psychological outcomes for individual members even while promoting organizational goals.
- Specifically, we use cults as a historical example of how psychological inflexibility is maintained.

ACT Model



Interactional Flexibility Model

Initial Individual
Flexibility

Organizational Values
Alignment

Contingency
Enforcement

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ACT methodology observes thoughts and feelings from a non-evaluative perspective. Cults may attempt to increase fusion to group values by first targeting individual values from prior sources. The Heaven's Gate cult identified "major offenses" that included sexual arousal in thought or action, or having unshared thoughts.

In the Moonies cult, group sessions produced conformity to cult values. Individual behaviors or statements aligned with cult values were reinforced, while nonconforming values were punished or extinguished with silence. Values set by cult leaders superseded any conflicts between the cult values and individual members' values.

The Heaven's Gate cult, infamous for ritualistic mass suicide in 1997, enforced policies specifically aimed at increasing commitment to the group. Members were instructed to write a statement detailing their degree of commitment to the group, and members who did not detail commitments adequately were "outed" publicly to the group.

Discussion

Interactional flexibility represents the spectrum of conflict or alignment between individuals and a given organizational milieu. Within the model, four relationships are possible:

- 1. <u>Value alignment:</u> An individual and the organizational milieu have shared values and can maintain flexibility.
- Forced alignment: A reduction of individual flexibility occurs: Fusion with organizational values (in conflict with personal values) or attachment to a conceptualized self as defined by the organization.
- Limited conflict: There are poorly defined or eclectic values present; Or, poor contingency enforcement of values-based rules within the organization produces minimal effects on flexibility.
- 4. <u>Escape:</u> To maintain flexibility, an individual leaves the organization or is terminated. An individual may also stay and remain in conflict.

Future Research

- The interactional flexibility model may serve to enhance future research concerning the application of ACT within organizations.
- Individual flexibility and time-series data assessments would provide further support for interactional flexibility.
- Experimental work will measure flexibility prior to and post initial organizational membership.
- Future work will examine the conditions under which fusion with values, or a conceptualized self, promotes inflexibility and how organizations might focus prevention interventions.

See authors for list of references.