Using the Heart and the Head

How to empower your experiential practice with RFT

Matthieu Villatte, PhD

ACBS Annual WORLD CONFERENCE 10
The heart and the head of ACT?

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Experiential techniques

Behavioral principles

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Clinical psychology deals with persistence of ineffective behaviors.
Two main variables are responsible for ineffective persistence.

1-Deceptive direct contingencies
Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Two main variables are responsible for ineffective persistence.

2-Verbal contingencies.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Experiential practice alters the influence of these variables in order to change behaviors.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
HOW?

- Altering sensitivity to direct and verbal contingencies
- Fostering a sense of workability and autonomy
- Shaping new effective behaviors

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
What does RFT bring to experiential practice?

- RFT allows understanding how language influences behaviors
- RFT can guide *our use of language* in therapy

- In experiential practice, RFT can help us use language to
  - Alter sensitivity
  - Foster workability and autonomy
  - Shape new effective behaviors
What are we going to do today?

- Learning RFT principles in experiential techniques
- Using RFT principles in experiential techniques

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Thinking from an RFT perspective

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Thinking from an RFT perspective

1: Language is a behavior

Understanding and building relations among events

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Thinking from an RFT perspective

2: Language changes our environment

Relating transforms the function of events.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Thinking from an RFT perspective

3: Language influences our behaviors

Our behaviors can be controlled by the verbal functions of stimuli surrounding us

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
RFT = Language is a behavior that influences behaviors.

Human behavior is influenced by direct \textbf{and} verbal sources of control.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
The battle among verbal and non verbal sources of control
When it turns well...

“Sides effects of chemo are part of the treatment that will cure my cancer”

- It limits the influence of detrimental sources of control
- It increases the influence of useful sources of control

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
When it turns bad...

“Sides effects of chemo are terrible. It is not worth going through the treatment”

- It limits the influence of useful sources of control
- It increases the influence of detrimental sources of control

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Turning these processes at the client’s advantage...

- Altering sensitivity to the sources of control
- Fostering a sense of workability and autonomy
- Shaping new effective behaviors

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Altering sensitivity

Dogs are dangerous

Sensitivity to the dog increases

Sensitivity to the thought decreases

The girl stops responding to the thought

Increasing and decreasing sensitivity to sources of control

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Altering sensitivity

Some typical experiential techniques

• Attentional control
• Changing the context of events
• Experimenting
• Metaphors
• Physical metaphors
• Perspective taking
• Augmentals

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Training attention increases sensitivity to alternative sources of control.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
As the word is repeated again and again, non verbal control (sounds) takes over verbal control (meaning).

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Altering sensitivity
Experimenting

Don’t think of a white human!

From: “I need to stop thinking of...”

To: “When I try to suppress my thought, it becomes more frequent...”

Experimenting a strategy and observing the consequences increases non-verbal control.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Altering sensitivity
Metaphors

Concrete situations increase sensitivity to non verbal sources of control.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Struggling in quicksand

Conditional Relation

Sinking even more

Function: Counter-productive

Struggling with anxiety

Conditional Relation

Feeling even more anxious

Relation of equivalence

Most effective behavior:

Increasing contact with the sand, not struggling

Most effective behavior

Accepting the emotion, not struggling

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Altering sensitivity

Physical metaphors

Verbal rule: “I need to win the struggle against my thoughts”

Non verbal observation + new rule: “The struggle never ends”

Evoking physical sensations increases sensitivity to non verbal sources of control.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Altering sensitivity
Perspective taking

From: “I am what I think about me”

To: “I am the perspective on what I think about me”

Deictic relations can decrease sensitivity to sources of control about the self (= Self-as-Context).

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Alterning sensitivity

Augmentals

“Thank you for taking good care of your health when you were young”

Augmentals can increase sensitivity to distant and abstract consequences (= values & actions).

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Altering sensitivity

Some typical experiential techniques

• Attentional control
• Changing the context of events
• Experimenting
• Metaphors
• Physical metaphors
• Perspective taking
• Augmentals

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Fostering a sense of workability and autonomy

- Once the client is sensitive to alternative sources of control, he can choose more effective behaviors
- How to make this choice?

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Fostering workability and autonomy
Mastering the use of rules

• **Tracking**: Following a rule to contact the consequence described by the rule.

• **Pliance**: Following a rule to be reinforced by the rule giver (what happens besides that doesn’t matter).

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Fostering workability and autonomy
Mastering the use of rules

Clients engage in behaviors because they are effective.

Clients learn to choose their behaviors without the therapist.

Encouraging tacting and tracking.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Fostering workability and autonomy
Mastering the use of rules

- Clearly defining behaviors and contingencies
- Taking into account variable and short term effects

Formulating precise tracks to make sure that rule following is effective.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Tacting and tracking

It was hard to focus on vs observing my thoughts.

What was that like to do the meditation exercise?

The client starts describing his experience.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Tacting and tracking

I kept getting distracted because I have so much on my mind.

What was difficult exactly?

The therapist encourages him to be more precise.

The client is more precise. He notices that he was distracted.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Tacting and tracking

Hmm... That was quite upsetting. I felt stupid that I can’t even focus for a few minutes.

How did that make you feel to find the exercise difficult?

The client expresses the feeling and the thought he had.

The therapist encourages the client to notice his feelings in order to keep exploring his experience.
Vignette: Tacting and tracking

I tried to think of something else. I hate that feeling.

And what did you do when you started to feel stupid?

The client notices that he tried to think of something else. (Note also the implicit rule!)

The therapists encourages the client to notice his behavior when he felt upset and stupid.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Tacting and tracking

For a little while... Then I thought about work and it made me feel horrible too.

Did it work? Did you stop thinking that you were stupid?

The client notices the short term and the long term effect.

The therapist encourages the client to notice the effectiveness of his behavior.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Tacting and tracking

Yeah...

So, first you had that unpleasant thought, and then you tried to get rid of it...

The client confirms that the track matches his experience.

The therapist reformulates the client’s experience as a track. He only initiates the formulation to encourage the client to do it progressively by himself.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Tacting and tracking

Yeah... For a moment I was able to think of something else.

And it worked for a little while...

The client confirms and completes the rule.

The therapist keeps reformulating, but slowly, as a way to encourage the client to take the lead.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Tracking

Not really... It worked for a while.

Would you say that it worked to stop thinking of being stupid?

The client draws his conclusion with relative precision (short term effect is identified).

The therapist wraps up this observation by adopting the perspective of workability. He lets the client draw conclusions himself.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Tacting and tracking

It seems like it. I try to think positive but I feel worse and worse.

Do you mean that thinking of something else helps you only in the short term?

The client formulates a rule that matches his experience. He notices that his behavior is not effective.

The therapist encourages the client to be even more precise.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Fostering workability and autonomy
Connecting behaviors to lasting satisfaction

A criterion for workability and autonomy:

Lasting satisfaction

Assessing the capacity of behaviors to bring lasting satisfaction.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
This interaction shows the debriefing of the "Writing a letter to yourself" exercise.

**Vignette: Connecting to lasting satisfaction**

*That was weird. Pretty sad...*

The therapist encourages the client to explore his own experience.

*How did that make you feel to imagine yourself in the future?*

The client expresses a feeling.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Connecting to lasting satisfaction

What was sad?

I don’t know...
Thinking that I might not have anything to thank myself for...

The client notices the source of his feeling.

The therapist encourages the client to further explore this feeling.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Connecting to lasting satisfaction

Yeah... It feels like nothing I do makes a difference.

You mean that it was sad to think that what you do now may not have a positive effect in the future?

The client notices the consequence of his current action. It doesn’t bring lasting satisfaction.

The therapist reformulates the client’s experience to highlight the connection between his behavior and lasting satisfaction.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Connecting to lasting satisfaction

Reconnecting with my kids. I feel like I don’t know them anymore.

What could make a difference?

The client identifies an action connected to lasting satisfaction.

The therapist encourages the client to explore actions that would work better to bring lasting satisfaction.
Vignette: Connecting to lasting satisfaction

If I could spend more time with them, maybe?

What would you do for example?

The client finds a concrete action

The therapists encourages the client to identify this action more concretely.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Connecting to lasting satisfaction

Would that make a difference? Is it something you would thank yourself for in the future?

Absolutely.

The therapist helps the client make a clear connection between this concrete action and lasting satisfaction.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Fostering workability and autonomy

- Encouraging tracking and formulation of tracks (tacting)
- Formulating precise tracks to make sure that rule following is effective
- Connecting behaviors to lasting sources of satisfaction
A bit of practice

• Use an experiential technique and encourage tracking and formulation of tracks

• Connect to lasting satisfaction.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Shaping new effective behaviors

Experiential techniques create opportunities to evoke and reinforce effective behaviors.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Shaping new effective behaviors
Connecting the room to the life outside

Noticing and evoking functional similarities between what happens inside and outside the therapy room.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Connecting the room to the life outside

Ok.

I would like you to imagine that you are walking in the desert. Try to picture that in your mind.

The therapist presents the metaphor as a genuine experiential exercise, almost like a role play.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Connecting the room to the life outside

You are walking in the desert and suddenly, you step in quicksand. How do you feel at this moment?

That’s scary... I would feel pretty panicked.

The therapist uses the present tense and encourages the client to notice his feelings as if he was actually in the quicksand.

The client notices how he feels.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Connecting the room to the life outside

I... I think I’m going to try to get out of it.

And what do you do now?

The client notices his urge to escape the quicksand.

The therapist encourages the client to notice his behavior in this situation.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Connecting the room to the life outside

I don’t know... I mean, I know that if I try to escape it, I will sink even more.

Ok. How do you do that?

The client expresses a rule about struggling in quicksand. It is a rule that matches the actual consequences.

The therapists encourages the client to tact his behavior with more precision.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Connecting the room to the life outside

Even if I know that it’s going to make me sink more, I can only think of getting out of the quicksand.

The client notices his urges to struggle despite what he knows about the consequence.

The therapist encourages the client to explore alternative behaviors.

I see. So what can you do?
Vignette: Connecting the room to the life outside

That makes things worse.

Ok. You feel like getting out, and if you try...

The client completes the track.

The therapist initiates the reformulation of the client’s experience as a track.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
I want to do something to feel better. I don’t want to be overwhelmed.

When you start sinking in your anxiety, what do you feel like doing?

The client expresses notices his urges when feeling anxious.

The therapist goes back to the client’s situation using the vocabulary of the metaphor and asks the same question as about the quicksand.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Connecting the room to the life outside

The client is making the connection between the metaphor and his situation.

The therapist encourages the client to notice his behavior.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Connecting the room to the life outside

Yeah. I never seem to find a way to calm me down when I am anxious.

It is similar to what happens with your anxiety?

The client notices the consequence of his behavior outside the room.

The therapist encourages the client to explore this connection with more precision.
Vignette: Connecting the room to the life outside

It feels like it, yeah...

Do you sink even more?

The client is becoming more aware of the consequence of his behavior outside the room.

The therapist uses the vocabulary of the metaphor to underline again the connection between the two situations.
Shaping new effective behaviors
Reinforcing progress

- Noticing steps toward effective change
- Favoring contact with beneficial consequences

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
This interaction starts with the client explaining that he didn't do his mindfulness homework. Although it doesn't seem like a sign of progress, there might still be something to reinforce.

Vignette: Reinforcing progress

The client expresses a rule stating that mindfulness practice is not useful.

The therapist reformulates the client’s experience in a way that helps notice the occurrence of a thought.

I tried to practice mindfulness but I didn’t think it would help me. I don’t see how observing my thoughts is going to change anything.

You started an exercise and the thought that it was not useful came up?

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Reinforcing progress

The client expresses a thought he had while considering practicing mindfulness.

The therapist reinforces the client noticing this thought and tries to make a connection between outside and inside the room.

Yeah. I have so much to do... I didn’t want to spend 10 minutes on this without being sure that it would help.

It’s interesting that you were able to notice that. Did you have a similar thought as you were coming to see me today?
Vignette: Reinforcing progress

Well... I think so... It’s not that I don’t trust you but I have so much to do... I hate thinking I am wasting my time, you know...

So as you were on your way here, you were having the thought that it was not worth?

The therapist reformulates the client’s experience to help him notice the thought.

The connection is there. The client had a similar thought as he was coming to therapy.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Reinforcing progress

Something like that, yeah.

And you still came. Was that difficult to do that while thinking it was not worth?

The therapist underlines the paradox between the thought and the action to reinforce the client’s capacity to desynchronize.

The client becomes more aware of his thought.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette: Reinforcing progress

Yes, it was hard. My days are going by so quickly. It makes me really anxious to waste my time.

I understand. What do you think motivated you to come despite these thoughts?

The therapist encourages the client to connect his action to an augmental that motivated his action despite his thoughts and feelings.

The client notices his feelings as he came to therapy.
Vignette: Reinforcing progress

I just can’t keep going like that. I need to do something. If I drop therapy now, I’m never going to get better.

So you reconnected therapy to what matters to you?

The therapist reformulates the client’s experience to strengthen the connection between the action and the source of motivation (augmental).

The client expresses a source of motivation to come to therapy.
Vignette: Reinforcing progress

Do you think it is something you could do with mindfulness exercises?

I guess so... I thought it was important to give it a chance, even if I have serious doubts.

The therapist encourages generalization to mindfulness practice.

The client becomes more aware of the augmental that motivates his behavior.
You mean give it a chance?

Yeah... See what happens when you keep doing the exercise even though you feel like it is not worth it.

The therapist wraps up in a way that underlines the natural consequence of the new behavior (limits pliance effects).

The client makes a step toward trying a new behavior.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Vignette 2: Reinforcing progress

I guess I could try.

Matthieu Villatte, PhD
Shaping new effective behaviors

• Connecting the room to the life outside

• Reinforcing progress
A bit of practice

- Notice and evoke functional similarities
- Reinforce progress
Final exercise: putting all principles together

- Altering sensitivity
- Fostering workability and autonomy
- Shaping new effective behaviors

➢ Role-play
Using the Heart and the Head

How to empower your experiential practice with RFT

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