

# Using Relational Frame Theory to Unlearn Ableism: A Systematic Review

Hannah M. Ferguson, MAEd, University of Missouri St. Louis, St. Louis Arc  
Dani Pizzella, BCBA-D, University of Missouri St. Louis

## INTRO

- Relational Frame Theory (RFT) is a product of behavior analysis’ third wave (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2002; Hayes, 2004) that has been used to conceptualize a breadth of prejudices in its short tenure. A stark majority of behavior analysts support people with disabilities (BACB, 2023), requiring application of the science to ableist behaviors to best support this population.

## METHODS

- The author conducted a systematic review of the literature on December 16, 2024. The search was conducted in APA PsycInfo, MEDLINE, ERIC, and APA PsycArticles, and included the terms (ableism OR disability discrimination OR ableist) AND (relational frame theory OR stimulus equivalence).
- The author conducted additional searches by both adding the terms (acceptance and commitment therapy OR acceptance and commitment training) and inputting them in place of (relational frame theory OR stimulus equivalence); the additional searches yielded zero results.
- The search yielded 58 results, and 19 duplicates were removed. Two additional records were removed due to being published in a language other than English. The author screened the 37 remaining results and excluded 36 of them due to the content of their titles and abstracts being unrelated to the research question.

## RESULTS

- Following screening, one article was retrieved and included in the review.
- Catrone and Koch (2021) replicated and expanded upon the foundational works of Dixon et al (2006) and Dixon et al (2009) by using a conditional discrimination procedure to identify, challenge, and redefine participants’ relational frames surrounding capabilities of individuals with disabilities.

## DISCUSSION

- This dearth of information is significant when paired with behavior analysts’ rejection of outsiders’ critiques of ABA as abusive and ableist.
- Nearly four decades ago, Lovaas (1987) published his seminal article, in which he prescribed intensive ABA for use with children with autism due to its effectiveness in making them “indistinguishable from their normal friends” (p. 8). From this research came cascades of insurance funding for ABA therapy as a treatment specifically for behavioral correlates of autism, including only “social communication and social interaction behavior” and “restrictive, repetitive, and/or stereotypical patterns of behavior” and excluding programming for all quality-of-life (QOL) measures such as independent and vocational skills (Treatment plan requirements).
- In the years since this shift in the field, individual systematic reviews of the literature analyze 41 and 71 studies increasing eye contact (Hustyi et al., 2023) and decreasing motor stereotypy (Akers et al., 2020) respectively.

**RFT is a theoretical approach that has been used to dissect discrimination across demographics (Dixon et al., 2006, Dixon et al., 2009; Farrell et al., 2023; Shea et al., 2022, Zuch et al., 2024).**

**Despite the majority population of behavior analysts who support people with disabilities, only one study has used this behavior analytic science to target ableism.**

**The field of behavior analysis has an ethical responsibility to people with disabilities that requires identification and mitigation of ableist behaviors (BACB, 2020).**

```
graph TD
    subgraph Identification
        A[Records identified from:  
APA PsycInfo (n = 31)  
MEDLINE (n = 20)  
ERIC (n = 6)  
APA PsycArticles (n = 1)] --> B[Records screened  
(n = 37)]
    end
    subgraph Screening
        B --> C[Reports sought for retrieval  
(n = 1)]
        B --> D[Records removed before screening:  
Duplicate records removed (n = 19)  
Records removed due to publication in a language other than English (n = 2)]
        C --> E[Reports assessed for eligibility  
(n = 1)]
        C --> F[Reports not retrieved  
(n = 0)]
        E --> G[Studies included in review  
(n = 1)]
        E --> H[Reports excluded  
(n = 0)]
    end
    subgraph Included
        G
    end
```

[hannahferguson.bx@gmail.com](mailto:hannahferguson.bx@gmail.com)

