Connection, Compassion, and Community

Russ Harris
Steve Hayes
Mindfulness and Acceptance
Work is Exploding

Why Now?
What Are People Seeking? What do They Need?
ACT and Evolution

• There is a growing interconnection between ACT, RFT and evolution. There will be major sessions on that in this conference. And it impacts on this workshop.
The Three C’s of Human Distinctiveness

- Cooperation
- Cognition
- Culture
Cognition

• The capacity for symbolic thought, including but not restricted to spoken language.

This is arguably unique
Culture

• The capacity to transmit learned information in a cumulative fashion.

Not unique but extraordinary in human populations
Cooperation

- The capacity to work together to facilitate mutual gains in large groups of unrelated individuals.

Again not unique but extraordinary ... Later I will give a talk on “what if it came first” and it is being assumed here
Example: Pointing
What could be simpler and more natural?

But only if you are human, or…
... a dog. When it comes to mental teamwork, 2nd place goes not to the apes, not to wolves (even when raised in captivity) but to the dogs, who have been genetically coevolving with humans for ~130,000 years

By the way, I thank David Sloan Wilson for several of these slides, including this one, and for the thinking behind them
The Cooperative Primate

- We work together in extraordinary ways ... perhaps even our structure supports it
Why?

• Individual-level adaptations are *locally* advantageous.

• Sharper teeth

• Thicker fur

• More cryptic coloration
Why?

• Social adaptations tend to be *locally disadvantageous*.

• Most behaviors that are “for the good of the group”

• Altruism
Then Why Would it Be Selected?

• Because “for the good of the group” traits are advantageous at a larger scale under certain conditions (but not all conditions, and never completely)

• Groups whose members behave “for the good of the group” survive and reproduce better than groups whose members are self-serving.
A Simple Thought Experiment

• The island of “good” versus the island of “evil”
Sociobiology

• Selfishness beats altruism within groups. Altruistic groups beat selfish groups.

These Compete Dynamically

Within-group selection

Chimp like ancestors

Between-group selection

Human like ancestors
At the extreme end (eusocial species) this has happened only a few handfuls of times and with enormous impact

Ants and termites: 2% of insect species; 50% of insect biomass
Cooperation Between Speakers and Listeners

Humans are the only animals for whom communication systems are interchangeable between speakers and listeners.

How we pulled that off: Deriving relations irrespective of role.
When children are taught to name objects, they are provided explicit training with arbitrary cues to relate word and objects across roles.

*Contextual cue for ‘Name-Object / Object-Name’ responding*
After thousands of such interactions, the child no longer requires explicit bi-directional training.

Notice that this is a kind of perspective taking. Other verbal relations build on that process to a greater degree.
RFT Take on the Formation of Self and Perspective Taking
Figure 2. Within subject analysis for Aladdin. Multiple baseline across levels of Complexity includes data series for each deictic relational frame. The lower panel represents Theory of Mind probe percentages.
Overall Relationship

For general direction of the relationship only. These data are from 2 studies, one unpublished, so details could change.
The Three C’s of Human Distinctiveness

• It seems increasingly possible that cooperation comes first,
• Cognition may even have evolved as a form of cooperation; as it evolved it expanded problem solving skill, true, but it also increased perspective taking,
• Culture can take these processes in either direction
The Challenge

• In the modern world there are forces that are reducing compassion, connection, and community.
• We are a cooperative species, and yet we are also dangerous to each other
• People seem to be yearning for something – we can explore this territory inside an unanswered question
What Are We Seeking?
What do We Need?
A Model of the ACT Therapeutic Relationship

Practitioner Psychology

Client Psychology

Therapy Interactions
PART 3
Compassion

• In the dictionary compassion just refers to shared suffering and an intention to do something about it

• The great majority of elaborated writings on compassion are Buddhist

• The psychological flexibility model seems to add something

• In this section we will explore the flip side
We Swim in a Sea of Images and Words

- Objectification and dehumanization is all around us
- A constant flow of judgment
- Greatly increased exposure to pain and horror all around the world
• Our children are growing up with images like this
• Or like this
Polyprejudice:
The Conceptualized Other Meets the Conceptualized Self

• Authoritarianism and social dominance
But In More Subtle Ways
Stigma and Prejudice
Digs Into Us, and at a Cost
Implicit Prejudice Toward Recipients of Care Predicts Intentions to Change Jobs

von Hippel, Brener, and von Hippel, 2008

- Therapists working with IV drug users
- Measured job stressors and intention to change jobs
- Measured implicit prejudice toward recipients of care
- Implicit prejudice mediated the stress – intent to leave relationship
The Conspiracy of Silence

• On the one hand, we do not want to propagate
• On the other, we can increase suppression and shame
The World is Becoming More Diverse

- Will diversity alone solve the problem?
- Not without progress in how to prepare the human mind for diversity
- Examples of reasons to think that: increase media exposure, increased objectification of others
- Or this horrible set of data ....
The Challenge of Diversity: The More Diversity in a Community

(Putnam, 2007)

• the fewer people vote
• the less they volunteer
• the less they give to charity
• they less they trust others, even within their own groups
• the less they work on community projects
Things We’ve Found So Far

• Experiential avoidance, perspective taking, and empathy work together to promote social caring
Caring About Being With Others

- Perspective Taking
- Empathy
- Experiential Avoidance

Now/Then
I/You
Here/There

Joy
Sadness

Social Anhedonia

Repertoire Narrowing
# Social Anhedonia

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Things We’ve Found So Far

• Shame and blame

• E.g. prejudiced attitudes towards obesity correlates with self-stigma and shame about obesity
Things We’ve Found So Far

- Defusion and mindfulness are protective
- Values matter, especially for action
Self as Context

Acceptance

Defusion

Contact with the Present Moment

Values

Committed Action

Psychological Flexibility

An ACT Model of Treatment/Health
ACT for Self-Stigma

- ACT is proving reliable for self-stigma
- Weight; GLBT; SUD
- Defusion and self-compassion seem especially important
• 134 participants in a 28 day in-patient drug program
• Randomly assigned in waves to receive treatment as usual or that plus a 6-hour ACT group focused particularly on self-stigma and shame
• Thus the total difference in the program is minimal – about 3-5% of the treatment hours
• 71% available at follow up
Shame Outcomes: Better for TAU

Average Score

Pre  Post

TAU

ACT
Quality of Life Outcomes: Better for TAU

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Average Score

Pre  Post
Group ACT for Shame: Substance Use Outcomes

![Graph showing days/month using drugs or alcohol for TAU and ACT at 1 month follow-up.](image-url)
Group ACT for Shame

• Consider what a practitioner would think at this point
• But now let’s look at what happens through the rest of follow up
Group ACT for Shame: Substance Use Outcomes

Days / Month Using Drugs or Alcohol

1 Month 2 Month 3 Month

Follow Up

TAU

ACT

$\ d = 1.21 $
Shame Outcomes

- ACT
  - r with use at follow up = ns
  - r with use at follow up = 1.51 (p < .01)

- TAU
Quality of Life Outcomes

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Average Score
ACT for Stigma

• Mixed effects so far
• The models work very well
• Some intervention studies work; some don’t; and we don’t yet understand why
• The intervention failures that exist so far are technology failures, not model failures
DAY 2
Personality Integration and Social Cooperation:

I am We – We are We
Cooperation is Selected When it is Becomes Advantageous on a Larger Scale
Individual Adaptation Usually Dominates

Within Group

Between Group
Finding ACT in the Hen House

- An experiment done by a Purdue University researcher (William Muir)
- Nine hens per cage
- Select for egg productivity in two different ways.
  - Select the best *individual* egg-layer within each group to reproduce.
  - Select the best *groups* (cages) of egg-layers to reproduce.
- Then go out six generations. Who is producing more eggs?
Within-Group Selection
Between-Group Selection
If This Applies Within: Who Are These Bad Ass Internal Chickens and What Are They Feeding On?
The Toxicity of Unrestrained Individual Adaptation Within Deictic Self Knowing Self Conceptualized Self
Bad Ass Chicken: Experiential Avoidance
Feel Good, Don’t Feel Bad

Don’t Feel Bad

Don’t Feel
Bad Ass Chicken: Cognitive Fusion and its Projection into the Conceptualized Self
Repertoire Narrowing
Signs of Bad Ass Chickens: Conflict and Secrecy Too Little Too Much
People Need Something Now:

Peaceful Cooperation Within and Without
ACT and Evolution

• Evolution in four words: Variation and selective retention
• ACT in a few more:
  – Undermine repertoire narrowing processes
  – Situate action in the conscious present
  – Choose your selection criteria
  – Evolve a more vital life
We are a We
The Peace Formula

• All here are welcome
• We will succeed or fail together
• Pick good success criteria (eggs!)
• Be flexible in their pursuit
• Do not reward bad actors
The Therapeutic Relationship in ACT

- Detect the flexibility processes in the client
- Levels: content, sample, relationship
- From and with the positive processes
- Instigate, model, and reinforce change
• Instigate, Model and Reinforce it, From Toward and With it

I’M  R F T With It
ACT Done Naturally

• Embodiment in you and in the relationship is the most natural way to instigate and support these processes
• Read the processes
• And use concrete methods to move them (and you already have some of these)
• Recycle
General Strategy

• Get centered
• Read the processes
• R: Values $\rightarrow$ action $\rightarrow$ if barriers go left
• L: Narrowing $\rightarrow$ flexibility $\rightarrow$ go right
• When in doubt, get centered
• Best sequence is not yet known
Simplified Version: Riding the ACT Bicycle

- Center to balance
- Right to move
- Left to loosen
It Starts with Mindful Listening
Centered in Consciousness
Centered in Perspective taking
Functionally Focused
(loosen ontology!)