

ABSURD CAMUSIAN THOUGHTS ON CONTEXTUAL BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE

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Abstract: The absurdism of Albert Camus may not be a philosophy of science, but it has more similarities with contextual behavioral science than are immediately apparent. Both emphasize the importance of suicide, both emphasize individual-world/environment relations, and both are concerned with the relation between values and freedom. But more so than just having some similarities with contextual behavioral science, Camus’s absurdist philosophy—considered from a behavioral perspective—orients readers to a way of conceptualizing psychological flexibility that emphasizes how values are constrained by society and what that means for a science unafraid to dabble in cultural change. This paper aims to highlight the absurdity of practices within behavioral science, particularly those that do not integrate evaluating relations between scientific constructs, cultural change, and culturalization and are potentially harmful to non-behavioral scientists. It also offers recommendations for addressing this issue, including considering psychological flexibility in terms of more informed choice.

Keywords: *absurdism, contextual behavioral science, values, psychological flexibility*

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.”
—Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955/2018, p. 3)

If one were to replace the word “philosophical” with “psychological” in the opening line of Camus’s (1955/2018) *The Myth of Sisyphus* and then ask a group of behavior analysts, “Who would write such a thing?”, there is a good chance they would say S. Hayes or another contextual behavioral scientist.

As to why, consider the goal line positioned by S. Hayes et al. (1996) in their functional reconceptualization of mental disorders related to experiential avoidance, “No human behavior is harder to conceptualize from a traditional categorical or dimensional diagnostic model than suicide” (p. 1161). The functional contextualist orientation of these authors toward complex verbal behavior builds upon a delimitation by S. Hayes (1992). He questions how any account based on direct contact with contingencies of reinforcement alone could explain suicide: “Death cannot function as a reinforcer ... Suicide is a verbal action” (pp. 115-117). In *Contextual Behavioral Science (CoBS)*, the ultimate measure of the utility of an analytical construct is the scope of problems it effectively helps solve (S. Hayes et al., 2012), and there don’t seem to be many problems more consequential than that of suicide. As both a verbal act and the “final ineffective avoidance strategy” (S. Hayes et al., 1996, p. 1161), an adequate account of human language

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and cognition must not only be able to explain why suicide occurs but must also orient researchers to applications that reduce its occurrence. If it cannot, the account is flawed either because suicide is not verbal, their definition of what is verbal is not sufficiently effective, or their account of human behavior is not comprehensive enough to explain suicide. Suicide is not just a problem but one of *the* problems, not only because of its implications for alleviating human suffering but for rationalizing the use of CoBS over other scientific enterprises concerned with explaining human behavior. Whereas suicide is a problem addressed by CoBS, *the problem of suicide* is a solution to *the problem of how valuable is CoBS as a scientific enterprise?* If contextual behavioral scientists can curb suicides, continued use of their constructs for solving less complex problems is not only highly likely but warranted.

Constructing the problem of suicide as a verbal act comprises several scientific activities and products conventional within CoBS. One such practice is asserting that suicide is a persistent problem for humanity that has, thus far, failed to be adequately addressed by older behavioral frameworks. This logic is all too familiar for consumers of writings on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), a sentiment epitomized by the following passage: “It’s remarkable how many problems human beings have that nonhumans can literally not imagine. Consider the data on suicide. It occurs in every human population, and serious struggles with suicide are shockingly commonplace...How can this be?” (S. Hayes & Smith, 2005, pp. 5-6). Implicit in this statement is the notion that suicide is common despite the fact that people have been attempting to stop it from happening. S. Hayes et al. (2001) provide an answer in response to a similar observation made by S. Hayes et al. (1999) that echoes S. Hayes (1992):

Two facts are evident with regard to suicide (S. Hayes et al., 1999): 1. it is ubiquitous in human societies, and 2. it is absolutely absent in all other living organisms. RFT explains why... Suicide is just problem-solving gone awry. (p. 224)

By claiming that relational frame theory (RFT) can explain suicide, S. Hayes et al. (2001) propose both a possible limit to the scope of their theory and criteria by which it can be tested. From their perspective, suicide can be explained by individuals behaving in accordance with relational networks characterized by the rule, “Now bad, do X, later better” (p. 224), comprising interrelated temporal frames, conditional frames, and frames of comparison. As these frames—nominalizations for specific types of relational responding—are arbitrarily applicable (S. Hayes et al., 2001), suicide is but one of many “X’s” that allow an individual to escape a verbally-constructed aversive circumstance. Suicide is formulated simply in RFT in a way that is not only difficult to emulate across other behavioral theories of language and cognition, such as stimulus equivalence (Sidman, 2000) and bidirectional naming (Horne & Lowe, 1996; Miguel, 2016), but testable empirically. Individuals who cannot participate in frames thought to be involved in suicide should not be able to commit suicide. Certain bodies of evidence would support this claim, particularly a lack of suicide reported among non-verbal children and adults and the increase in suicidal ideation as individuals engage in more and more complex forms of verbal behavior.

No such data have been compiled in CoBS. Yet, if suicide can be explained by RFT, its rate of occurrence should be decreased using ACT. This would constitute direct assessment of the value of CoBS. Although ACT and RFT developed somewhat independently, the midlevel terms that characterize the principles of ACT are thought to be described technically and rationalized by way of RFT. If suicide is first and foremost a matter of experiential avoidance in which one ends one’s own life to escape or avoid a verbally-constructed circumstance coherent with a relational network (S. Hayes et al., 2001), then ACT processes aimed at decreasing psychological inflexibility should be constructive for facilitating alternative courses of action. Such an ACT intervention may involve defusing suicidal thoughts through transforming aversive functions and promoting acceptance of circumstances in which relational responding occurs so that committed actions aligned with one’s stated values can be taken instead of those that may end one’s life. And indeed, evidence suggests that ACT promotes such psychological flexibility. Bazley and

Pakenham (2019) found that individuals participating in their ACT-based HOLLY Program demonstrated significant improvements in suicide prevention behaviors as compared to a wait-listed control group. Crasta et al. (2020) provide evidence that psychological inflexibility—the inverse of psychological flexibility—mediates a relation between COVID-19 stressors and suicidality. Likewise, Ducasse et al. (2014) suggest that ACT may be viable for treating suicidality among outpatients diagnosed with suicide behavior disorder; individuals who received an ACT-based intervention demonstrated reductions in amount and intensity of suicidal ideations. These studies suggest that ACT is a viable approach to preventing suicides.

Thus, an outer loop of the scientist-practitioner spiral is complete (c.f., Kantor, 1958, p. 48). CoBS offers a theory of suicide based on RFT that underlies effective strategies based on ACT for decreasing suicidality. Scientist-practitioners in CoBS can reasonably build off their theory and data to produce more precise applications for suicide, at least with respect to some contexts. By having a viable account of suicide, CoBS demonstrates both its significance and its strength as compared to other enterprises concerned with similar problems. With countless idiosyncratic circumstances to investigate, the prolonged productivity of activities concerning decreasing suicidality is all but assured. The rest is normal science (Kuhn, 1996), even if the problem is extraordinary.

It is with respect to solving this type of problem that attention is drawn back to *The Myth of Sisyphus*. For Camus, the problem of suicide is not simply one of accepting or denying that life has any meaning but one that can be used to illustrate a philosophy of the absurd, support its conclusions, and distinguish its characteristics from those of other philosophies. The problem of suicide is necessary to construct absurdism, just as it is necessary to construct “a behavioral science more adequate to the challenges of the human condition” (S. Hayes et al., 2012, p. 2). The point of this paper is not to try to analyze CoBS through Camus’s philosophical lens. What are worth discussing are similarities in assumptions foundational to absurdism and CoBS at large—as well as functional contextualism, RFT, and ACT in particular—that are relevant for describing not only how Camus and S. Hayes use the problem of suicide in a similar way but how they recognize values as fundamentally arbitrary. Camus is certainly no contextual behavioral scientist, but this discussion may be particularly illuminating for individuals participating within CoBS if recognizing similarities between CoBS and absurdism serves to orient them toward psychological flexibility from a different angle. It may also be constructive for shedding light on potential ethical issues in CoBS (and behavior analysis) that have seemingly gone unnoticed or under-published. But to begin, let us consider parallels between postulates within absurdism and the basic unit of analysis underlying the functional contextualist philosophy of CoBS: the act-in-context.

Absurd Acts-in-Context

The act-in-context is the basic unit of analysis in CoBS, constructed in accordance with a functional contextualistic philosophy. S. Hayes et al. (2012) describe the act-in-context as a whole-organism/environment event occurring within an evolving circumstance characterized historically and situationally by how it changes as an organism interacts with it. This definition is not only similar to Kantor’s (1959) description of a psychological event—if one excludes the primacy of consequences—but also how Camus describes contact with the absurd. In describing what is considered absurd, Camus (1955/2018) states:

If I accuse an innocent man of a monstrous crime, if I tell a virtuous man that he has coveted his own sister, he will reply that this absurd... The virtuous man illustrates by that reply the definitive antinomy existing between the deed I am attributing to him and his lifelong principles. “It’s absurd” means “It’s impossible” but also “It’s contradictory.” If I see a man armed only with a sword attack a group of machine guns, I shall consider his act to be absurd. (p. 29)

Similarly to an act-in-context, an absurd act is not recognized only with respect to the circumstances in which it occurs. Contacting absurd acts amounts to a “confrontation and an unceasing struggle” (p. 31) for an observer. To describe absurdity (or absurd acts) is to describe a wholeness between a person and their world—including one’s self—on the basis of their seemingly contradictory characteristics. In the example above, the innocent man recognizes a contradiction in the circumstance he finds himself in (i.e., being accused of a crime) and how he lives his life. While a contextual behavioral scientist may likely contend that no interaction that is functionally defined can be contradictory, Camus’s contradictions are defined with respect to incompatibility between the perceived purpose of an act and the setting in which it occurs. From an observer’s perspective, an act is considered absurd when it is recognized as incoherent with respect to the circumstance in which it occurs. The absurd is found in the totality of a self-contradictory interaction. As Camus writes:

In this particular case and on the plane of intelligence, I can therefore say that the Absurd is not in man (if such a metaphor could have a meaning) nor in the world, but in their presence together. For the moment it is the only bond uniting them. If I wish to limit myself to the facts, I know what man wants, I know what the world offers him, and now I can say that I also know what links them. I have no need to dig deeper. (p. 30)

The absurdity of an act derives from its relation to a world in which it, according to reason or one’s perspective, should not occur. Whereas reason would dictate an underlying logic explaining the act, recognition of the absurdity of an act—not its constituent parts alone—is enough to describe it. To “know what man wants” is to know what he is trying to achieve, a consequence that is absurd given the current situation or “what the world offers him.” Further elaboration of this point requires understanding what Camus means by “truth” and “consciousness”:

Of whom and of what indeed can I say: “I know that!” This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. The world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all of my knowledge, and the rest is construction...In psychology as in logic, there are truths but no truth. (p. 19)

There exists an obvious fact that seems utterly moral: namely, that a man is always prey to his truths. Once he has admitted them, he cannot free himself from them. One has to pay something. A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it. (p. 31)

To pluralize “truths” among individuals is to decry against a notion of absolute Truth. To be “conscious of the absurd” is to recognize some act as absurd, even if others would recognize it differently. Accordingly, absurdity for Camus is different than the absurdity recognized by anyone else. To admit one’s truth is to be bound to it and not someone else’s. From a CoBS perspective, this is tantamount to saying that one behaves coherently with respect to their own historically-established relational network and not that of someone else (or, at least only to the extent to which they share a history of interaction). It is also to say that recognizing absurdity is a persistent disposition once it occurs. In his own terms, Camus ties recognition of the absurd to the history of an ongoing interaction, a history that is relevant to understanding how an individual continues to see the absurd after it has been contacted. Once the absurd has been contacted, it persists insofar as an individual continues to see, think, and otherwise contact it. “Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it” (p. 54).

Living an absurd life permits a degree of freedom akin to that sought by S. Hayes (2015), Skinner (1971), and other functionalists who have recognized how consequences constrain behavior. As S. Hayes (2015, p. xxi) points out, behaviorism was unfairly criticized after *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (Skinner, 1971) for dismissing the notion that people should be free. Skinner (1972) clarifies his position in a *New York Times* op-ed:

My argument was surely simple enough. I was not discussing a philosophical entity called freedom but rather the behavior of those who struggle to be free. It is part of the human genetic endowment that when a person acts in such a way as to reduce “Aversive” (e.g., potentially dangerous) stimuli, he is more likely to do so again. Thus, when other people attempt to control him through a threat of punishment, he learns to escape from them or attack them in order to weaken their power. When he succeeds, he feels free, and the struggle ceases. But is he really free? (p. 29)

Skinner (1972) goes on to discuss how behavior is always controlled by consequences having either reinforcing or punishing effects on behavior, a relation epitomized within the act-in-context. For S. Hayes et al. (2012), consequences are a fundamental characteristic of the act-in-context. An act cannot be defined without adherence to consequences that influence or are functionally related to it. Acts are never ‘free’ from consequences because together—as in Skinner’s (1938) three-term contingency—they constitute parts of an inseparable unity between an organism’s behavior and environment, a psychological postulate constructed to focus analysis on more effective interacting within a given circumstances. Recognizing functional relations between acts and consequences allows for more effective action with respect to behavioral contingencies and, thus, an increased capacity to “*foster freedom and dignity*” (S. Hayes, 2015, p. xxi, italics in original). Given that behavior is related to its consequences, the construction of freedom worth exploring is that of relative rather than absolute constraints. Behavior is always controlled or functionally related to its environment, but it also evolves so that individuals are able to effectively navigate contingencies and allocate time to more preferred activities. It is with respect to a similar type of relative freedom that Camus explores constraints imposed by believing in freedom itself:

...the absurd man realizes that hitherto he was bound to that postulate of freedom on the illusion of which he was living. In a certain sense, that hampered him. To the extent to which he imagined a purpose in his life, he adapted himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became the slave to his liberty... Thus the absurd man realizes that he was not really free. (pp. 57-58)

Here Camus not only details how belief in one’s own freedom is related to living a life in which activity is constrained by achievement criteria, but he describes the inherently verbal quality of living a life in which acts are performed for a purpose. To believe in the meaning of life is to live a life of preference, to act in accordance with the relative value of living a life in a certain way (Camus, 1955/2018, p. 60). Such thinking is reminiscent of Rachlin’s (2017) take on final causes, but Camus’s orientation toward preference is specifically that which is verbally-constructed. Human acts have a purpose that is important to compare to their likely outcomes when describing the absurd (Camus, 1955/2018, p. 29). While behaviorists can account for purpose by considering acts as constituent elements within temporally-extended patterns (Pérez-Álvarez & Sass, 2009; Rachlin, 1992, 2017), the linguistics of the values Camus references appeal to consideration of their constituency within a network of social interaction. Preference for Camus cannot only be interpreted as a matter of time allocation but recognition of the life one finds meaningful, the life one considers relatively more valuable among alternatives available within society.

As such, Camus’s conception of value is more similar to S. Hayes’s than it is to that of molar behavior theorists. For S. Hayes and Sanford (2015), values are not only qualities of behavioral patterns but “descriptions regarding the desired qualities of behavior” (p. 18). Through description, values can constitute motivative augmentals that influence behavior by altering the functional context in which it occurs so that an individual is more likely to behave in a way that is coherent with the description (S. Hayes et al., 1999). When an ACT therapist guides a client through values clarification, they do so in order to alter the relational networks into which aversive thoughts and feelings are integrated so that more of the client’s time is spent engaged in particular, valued activities (S. Hayes et al., 2004). In CoBS, people’s values cannot be only derived from observation of the behavioral patterns in which they act because individuals seek services so

that they may participate in such patterns, patterns they may have never participated in and only know of indirectly through arbitrarily applicable relational responding. Values clarification is not only viewed as a fundamental process within ACT, but chosen values are seen “as a necessary component of a meaningful life” (S. Hayes, 2004, p. 647). Values and the meaning of life are as intertwined in a CoBS framework as they are for Camus.

The linguistics of living a valued life for Camus cannot be overstated. Just as S. Hayes et al. (1999) link human suffering to arbitrarily applicable relational responding, Camus finds happiness in living in the silence of an absurd life. This silence refers to living a life without meaning, a life that cannot be described in terms of values. To live a valued life is to live a life of meaning, to be subservient to a purpose. To live an absurd life, alternatively, is to be free from living a life of purpose. “Sisyphus’ silent joy” (p. 123) is an apt metaphor for describing what it means to live an absurd life because “happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth” (p. 122); suffering is inevitable when living in pursuit of something. There are serious philosophical issues with the notion that a human can live a life without meaning, especially when human life is considered integrated in social practices as a linguistic medium (Ribes-Iñesta, 2006), but Camus’s general point is well taken. To live a life of meaning is to suffer, just as arbitrarily applicable relational responding is a special human capacity for suffering. Contemplating the absurd cannot be considered a verbal act from an RFT perspective because it is not instrumental or in the service of a consequence. Nothing is achieved through contacting the absurd; the act is meaningless. It may not be chanting alone on a mountaintop (L. Hayes, 1993), but there is a happiness in the silent oneness of living a life without purpose. Endlessly pushing a rock up a hill is only tragic when there is something that is supposed to come after.

These similarities between constructs within CoBS and absurdism should not come as a surprise when considering a shared influence: phenomenology. Camus (1954/1992, 1955/2018) directly criticizes phenomenological positions crafted by Husserl (1931/1982), Heidegger (1953/2010), and others in ways that—and in the spirit of Derrida (1978)—negate their relative value while also necessitating it to validate his own perspective. Whereas Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology relies on an appeal to a universal system of all possible types of objectivities constituting consciousness, Camus (1955/2018, pp. 43-47) argues that such a postulate simply repositions Reason within the world of experience rather than as an innate ability within the experiencer. Whereas existentialist philosophies are similar to absurdism insofar as they recognize the futility of finding an absolute Truth or essential meaning of life, Camus (pp. 31-41) states that most of these positions are coherent with escapism through suicide, an act that is not a necessary conclusion when one recognizes the freedom from suffering afforded by living an absurd life. Camus’s assertions require juxtaposition with what they critique to rationalize their own merit, just as RFT acquires much of its significance within behavioral science by the advances it makes on Skinner’s account of verbal behavior (S. Hayes et al., 2001). One could even interpret such oppositions in terms of arbitrarily applicable relational responding with respect to intellectual differences, something Skinner’s (1957) theory on verbal behavior would be strained to do from an RFT perspective.

In the case of S. Hayes’s work, phenomenology has had a similar role. As S. Hayes (2015, p. xxi) states, phenomenology “spoke to some of my earliest interests in psychology,” an influence that is apparent through the act-in-context construct itself. The act-in-context bears the influence of phenomenology (and the integrated field construct, in accordance to a logic Kantor (1945) differentiates from Hegel’s) insofar as it acknowledges that an event is observed. This is to say that acts are not only functionally related to situational and historical circumstances but that they are observed and, thus, functionally related with observers (Fletcher & S. Hayes, 2009). However, while they recognize these similarities between behavioral philosophies and phenomenology, the skepticism Fletcher and S. Hayes (2009) show toward the utility of comparing phenomenology with radical behaviorism, functional contextualism, or behavior analysis for the progress of a more effective science of human behavior demonstrates their willingness to

juxtapose phenomenology to their own orientations for their own interests, just as Camus (1955/2018) does. Camus and S. Hayes are certainly not the only ones who engage in such activity; conventional auspices continuously transform as individuals relate with respect to what is different from what has been said before. But, given that they employ similar strategies, they seem to share similar values concerning how to construct an intellectual position. Absurdism is certainly no philosophy of behavioral science and there are plenty of incongruences to point out between it and CoBS; nonetheless, they share more commonalities than one might think. And such commonalities may be useful for a constructive critique of CoBS.

Absurd Values

When it comes to choosing a valued pattern of behavior in which to live one's life, an absurdist's orientation cannot be further away from ACT. The purpose of ACT is to increase psychological flexibility so that an individual may engage in valued activities (S. Hayes et al., 1999). By contrast, the absurdist views living a life in accordance with values as constraints synonymous with living a meaningful life. Said differently, whereas ACT aims at increasing participation within valued activities, the absurdity of life can orient an individual toward quantity of experience over quality (Camus, 1955/2018, p. 60). The "absurd man" (p. 66), unbridled by the absurd from conventional constraints called values, is free to live in many different ways that might have been described as different values if any greater meaning was recognized. When all social practices are considered conventional, arbitrary, and without essential meaning or universal value, when everything that people do is considered equally absurd, there are no meaningful differences in the quality of a life lived. There are only non-ordinal differences in how one can live one's life, a perspective that orients the absurdist to live in a multitude of ways rather than one valued above others.

An appreciation of the quantity-over-quality of how one lives one's life is antithetical to the purpose of ACT from the client's point-of-view, yet it is another way of recognizing the arbitrary applicability of ACT from the vantage of a scientist-practitioner. For ACT to have adequate scope, it must be applicable across a wide range of clients with different values. Values is a fitting name for an ACT process when one considers the mathematical definition of value as a number of a set characterizing a variable (Smail, 1949) or its function within structural sciences of language (Saussure, 1916/1969). Within ACT, an individual's values must be substitutable with one another for values clarification to be a generalizable technique for augmenting relational contexts across individuals. For values clarification and other ACT-based tools to be effective for increasing psychological flexibility, they must be applicable across individuals with different values. Effective therapists would never use a non-idiographic program to implement ACT (S. Hayes et al., 1999), but the basic framework must be general enough to be applied across individuals before it is tailored to a particular individual's clinical situation. Such thinking is essential to understanding ACT. To the extent that an individual uses ACT, ACT functions similarly to an arbitrarily applicable relational operant one engages in to achieve a particular outcome (e.g., living a valued and meaningful life) for oneself and/or others. The fact that an ACT workbook like *Get Out of Your Mind and into Your Life* (2005) can be found useful, at least in the first author's own life, speaks to the scope of its arbitrary applicability.

Problems with the idiosyncraticity of ACT arise, though, when one considers the social integration of values. In *The Rebel* (1954/1992, p. vii), Camus emphasizes this facet of human life:

If we decide to rebel, it must be because we have decided that a human society has some positive value. But in each case the values are not "given"—that is the illusionist trick played by religion or by philosophy. They have to be deduced from the conditions of living, and are to be accepted along with the suffering entailed by the limits of the possible. Social values are rules of conduct implicit in a tragic fate; and they offer a hope of creation.

This point is aligned with others made by Pérez-Álvarez and Sass (2009), Ribes- Iñesta (2006), L. Hayes et al. (1994), S. Hayes et al. (2001), and those discussed above linking language to conditions of human interaction. Values-based actions may not be found when a client references their own life, but declaring one's values always involves references to conventional participations within a cultural system. In this sense, an individual has no values of their own. The quality of a given individual's behavior stream is always going to be different than that of any other individual, but they can share the same values insofar as they share an orientation or their behavior is related to the same consequences. One may be able to speak of things and events that others have not seen, but one is helpless to do so in a nonconventional way. To have a value is to participate in a collectivity (L. Hayes et al., 1994), just as to declare one's own values is to participate in a collectivity. From this perspective, there are only "one's own values" insofar as what is referred to by "one" is "one of a group" that behaves in the same, conventional way.

If this perspective on values is taken seriously, the role of ACT in culturalization processes must also be taken seriously. Kantor (1982) coined the term culturalization to refer to processes by which cultural interbehavior is established or an individual acquires conventional conduct. Public data on commonalities among values chosen during ACT are sparse, but they are likely similar across individuals. It is not hard to fathom an ACT workshop in which participants are instructed to write down their "freely chosen values" and 95% of them write down some variation of "to be a loving family member" and a near equal proportion of those individuals write down similar committed goals toward living a life in which family is valued. There is nothing absolutely wrong with being a loving family member or any other value, but there is something potentially problematic about the similarity in patterns of living that ACT likely facilitates. Like other forms of technology, this is not an issue with ACT per se but the cultural system ACT is used in. This is especially apparent within commercial organizations in which values clarification—or, perhaps, values realignment through the implementation of clarification exercises in group settings—is used to promote productivity (e.g., Bond et al., 2006).

From more molecular psychological perspectives, recognitions of these issues may not readily actualize because ACT-based processes like defusing, accepting, and attending to the present circumstance are viewed as constituents within patterns of behavior of a single individual. What should be important for an ACT therapist is what is important for their client. From a more molar perspective, patterns of individual behavior may be integrated with more temporally-extended patterns characterized by objectives others benefit from more. All participating individuals may be said to be mutually controlling or influencing the behavior of one another when participating in the same, objective-based pattern, but their interactions with respect to one another may be asymmetrical. A CEO who runs a company does not participate in making products the same way their employees do; functionalities of different individuals within a cultural pattern are distinct. This distinctness is no doubt related to differential pattern integration; less of the activity of an individual who makes more money through working with others is integrated into patterns of survival than those who make less money (and have less money) despite operating within the same pattern. Differential participation within the same patterns does not only imply differences in technical capacities, access to resources, and how individuals are integrated but different verbal interactions with respect to oneself. Recognizing one's own behavior as coherent with freely chosen values like "being a productive member of society" or "hardworking" may function as reinforcers. As such, values may be of use to other individuals participating in economic and political patterns. This is especially concerning when one considers how researchers within CoBS promote capitalism (e.g., Biglan & Embry, 2013, who also note the harm capitalism has done [p. 101]). The issue is not capitalism itself, although it arguably could be (Haraway, 1991). The issue is non-critically integrating ACT and other CoBS constructs into the cultural patterns of clients without rigorous consideration of how such constructs may change them. CoBS constructs are primarily evaluated in terms of truth-by-effective action criteria without being evaluated with respect to their contribution to transformations in cultural auspices over long periods of time. There is good movement

in this direction by individuals who want to construct more culturally-competent care (e.g., Lombardero et al., 2022; Su et al., 2019), but it is insufficient. ACT certainly has its benefits, but its high potential for facilitating culturalization suggests costs for cultural groups that are not being analyzed. One such cost may be a loss of cultural diversity and the meaning of particular things and events, which may be observed as more and more individuals interact in a psychologically flexible way (as a particular disposition constructed through ACT) and as more individuals participate in certain valued patterns over others. There simply are too little data to say either way, and there need to be to ensure that calls to action for more culturally-sensitive ACT services are not simply instrumental for delivering services that result in homogenizing conventional conduct.

This potential functionality of ACT can be traced to the very beginning of applied behavior analysis. Many early behavior analysts were concerned with normalizing the conduct of individuals deemed “deviant” (e.g., Wahler, 1975; White et al., 1972), “delinquent” (e.g., Fixsen et al., 1972; Hobbs & Holt, 1976; Kefir et al., 1974), “inappropriate” (e.g., McLaughlin & Malaby, 1972; Barton, 1970), and “noncompliant” (e.g., Doleys et al., 1976; Goetz et al., 1975), to name a few applied research areas still explored today (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2022; Joslyn & Vollmer, 2019; Majdalany et al., 2017; Reyes et al., 2017). Stated goals and behavior changes were admirable in some respect; in order for individuals to live independently with respect to both physical and social environments, individuals should have behavioral repertoires that allow them to navigate such environments effectively (Van Houten et al., 1988). Such perspectives have undoubtedly helped individuals in terms of their survivability in line with Skinnerian cultural selection logic (Skinner, 1981) and the ethics derived from it, but the paternalism of such orientations and the problems they engender are hard to ignore (c.f., Melo et al., 2015). When behavior analysts look back to applied research aimed at adjusting individual’s sexual orientations (e.g., Abel et al., 1975; Barlow & Agras, 1973; Rekers & Lovaas, 1974) and helping “culturally deprived” children—typically black and from low socioeconomic backgrounds—act more like their white, middle class peers (e.g., Broden et al., 1970; Cossairt et al., 1973; Hart & Risley, 1968; Wasik et al., 1969), it is easy to recognize such research as problematic, even if—or maybe especially if—clients appreciate such services. Recognizing contemporary practices as problematic is more difficult the more coherent they are with one’s history of relational responding. For example, consider the poignancy of Winett and Winkler’s (1972) criticism of behavior modification in schools:

Behavior modification acknowledges the role of the environment in producing behavior, but has to a large extent, concerned itself with changing people such that they can adjust more appropriately to the particular institution or social sub-system in which they live. There is another role, however, for the behavior modifier that involves changing the social system that maintains the behavior, thereby creating new environments instead of patching up the results of existing environments. (p. 503)

In the same issue, most aspects of Winett and Winkler’s paper are critiqued by O’Leary (1972). To O’Leary’s credit, he acknowledges the importance of critically considering which behaviors should be changed, but he also contends that such selection is not really in the purview of behavior modifiers:

The behavior modification approach provides a set of rather well-defined procedures to change behavior, but the procedures do not spell out the goals or the behaviors which *ought* to be taught or changed. Whether the goals of education in the year 2000 involve a structured class or an unstructured class, a class which emphasizes affective or cognitive development, it is the authors’ opinion that the types of principles and procedures described [by behavior modifiers] will be helpful in reaching whatever goals our educational system chooses. (p. 509)

Proposing neutrality of the behavior analyst's participation within values-based patterns is commonplace. It is not the job of the behavior analyst to select which behavior should be changed, but that of society. Several behavior analysts have spoken against this logic by asserting the importance of offering services that are aligned with their own values (Ruiz & Roche, 2007; Zuriff, 1987), and most presumably deliver services they value. Still, the position that behavior analysts simply create effective technology that others can use for their own interests has prominence. If this were not the case, behavior analysts would not claim that their science is or can be "politically neutral" (Holland, 1978, p. 173), nor would they assess social validity (Wolf, 1978) or the maintenance of social contingencies constructed by behavior analysts to examine how different groups find their services valuable. As much is a logical extension of Baer et al (1968):

The label [applied] is not determined by the research procedures used but by the interest which society shows in the problems being studied. In behavioral application, the behavior, stimuli, and/or organism under study are chosen because of their importance to man and society, rather than their importance to theory. (p. 92)

If a behavior is socially important, the usual behavior analysis will aim at its improvement. The social value dictating this choice is obvious. (p. 91)

Similarly to O'Leary (1972), Baer et al. (1968) contend that behavioral technology earns value by its use in society without much consideration of the temporality of such values or the long-term implications for behavior analysis when values change but access to research and direct and indirect behavioral changes remain. The value of altering behavior that is deemed socially important is "obvious" (p. 91) and not in need of further questioning. Many behavior analysts have publicly questioned the ethicality of their colleagues' activities (LeBlanc, 2020; Nordyke et al., 1977; Winkler, 1977) and participated in the formalization of behavior-analytic ethics (Bailey & Burch, 2016; Cihon et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2023; Dittrich, 2015; Ruiz & Roche, 2007; Zuriff, 1987). Few if any attempts have been made, though, to re-describe applied behavior analysis as constituent activity within a more encompassing, constantly transforming cultural system for the explicit goal of ethically evaluating our own behavior. Follow-up articles that reconsider Baer et al.'s (1968) dimensions of applied behavior analysis (Baer et al., 1987; Critchfield & Reed, 2017) have done little to expand on how to critically evaluate the selection of behaviors to change or the consequences of doing so across more extended timescales. In this respect ACT is incredibly progressive. ACT may be applied to groups as well as individuals (Atkins et al., 2019), but inherent within ACT is the notion of assent (c.f., Morris et al., 2021). The ACT therapist does not choose a client's values or what behavior they wish to change—the client does. But to what extent does an individual choose their own values when they are derived from social practices?

Camus's philosophical quantity-over-quality of experience construct may be helpful for pivoting applied research and practice to address this issue. In ACT, psychological flexibility is defined as "the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends" (Biglan et al., 2008, p. 142). Defusion, acceptance, committed action, and other ACT processes are used together to decrease human suffering by promoting psychological flexibility so that individuals may live in accordance with values that they choose rather than within patterns they—not ACT therapists—recognize as problematic. This conception of psychological flexibility, while useful, suggests that psychological flexibility is a disposition amenable to participating in valued patterns of behavior rather than a capacity to linguistically choose among available alternative patterns. The difference is one that concerns exploration. Biglan et al.'s (2008) definition refers to relational responding that is coherent with repeated participation within valued patterns. The definition being suggested here refers to arbitrary applicable relational responding involved in understanding different possible patterns

through exploratory activity so that more informed choices may be made. Choices can be regarded as referential events comprising functional interactions between a responding human and stimulation of relations among referents (L. Hayes et al., 1994). Any choice conceived of as a referential event requires at least two referents participating as linguistically perceived alternative courses of action. To make an informed choice refers to the degree to which a human orients to more than two referents (or more than one dimension of them) prior to consummatory action towards one referent and away from others. In addition to contacting environmental reconfiguration related to each alternative, an individual can make a more informed choice by exploring different alternatives through derived relational responding prior to consummatory activity. Through such linguistic interactions with other people and ourselves, individuals may find themselves more capable to behave in accordance with chosen values given that they have more to choose from, evaluate, and consider. Biglan et al.'s (2008) definition is certainly more fundamental to being able to choose and act in accordance with a valued pattern, but the definition described here finds theirs lacking when considering constraints it does not orient to imposed by cultural auspices. Said differently, their definition addresses contacting values characterizing a particular quality whereas the definition proposed here addresses contacting greater quantities of valuable alternatives referentially and concurrently.

How does an individual's behavior evolve from recognizing two alternative courses of action to more courses of action concurrently? Undoubtedly this transformation can be described in terms of arbitrarily applicable relational operants with respect to evolving networks of difference relations involving previous participations within patterns sharing formal similarity with the current situation, but it is unclear exactly what factors contribute to more efficient and expansive evolutions. Empirical research is needed to address this issue, but it is probably safe to suggest that relational training in which different types of arbitrarily applicable relational responding are established and increased contact with the orientations of other people are important. Individuals interact with the world differently than one another; an individual's orientation—how they interact with the world—adjusts when interacting with people in particular configurations of a circumstance with more or less novelty. Individuals are then more or less able to reference or relationally respond with respect to properties of how they interact with different individuals—as well as how different individuals have interacted with them—and their shared circumstance. From a more molar orientation, the value of doing so can be described in terms of relative time allocated to participating within such activities (i.e., there are no activities without value because there are only activities of relative value). This definition is not incompatible with also referring to value in terms of relations among referents (as long as one's participation within temporally-extended patterns is coherent with what is “chosen”). Such a reorientation in how psychological flexibility is considered may be constructive for CoBS, especially as researchers become more concerned not only with how ACT can be used as a tool for someone to use to improve the quality of their own life but how someone improving the quality of their own life can be used as a tool in someone else's achievement. Or, as Camus might say, for some master.

Thinking about psychological flexibility in terms of informed choice may also be relevant to behavior analysis. Several behavior analysts have recently investigated topics concerning delivering culturally-responsive and competent care that helps clients interact with their own cultural environments rather than those of others (Beaulieu & Jimenez-Gomez, 2022; Delgado et al., 2023; Jimenez-Gomez & Beaulieu, 2022a, 2022b). These efforts are coherent with Van Houten et al.'s (1988) assertion that “the ultimate goal of all services is to increase the ability of individuals to function effectively in both their immediate environment and the larger society” (p. 112) and promoting stakeholder participation when designing community intervention plans (Cihon et al., 2020; Fawcett, 1991). Helping underserved clients from underrepresented groups is certainly progressive for behavior analysis (and behavioral science at large), but it is not without risks. Behavior analysts not only help individuals and communities solve their problems using behavioral technology; they teach them to interact behavior-analytically with their environments in

accordance with certain philosophical assumptions (e.g., monism, determinism, functionalism). Members of a community are taught to behave as behavior analysts to maintain the behavior of others (e.g., Cossairt et al., 1973; Flood et al., 2002; Laski et al., 1988; Rice et al., 2009), and evidence suggests that teaching individuals to implement behavioral interventions to solve problems in one setting can generalize to others (e.g., Ducharme & Feldman, 1992; Koegel et al., 1977, 1978; Moore & Fisher, 2007; Pence et al., 2012). Through teaching individuals self-management skills (Bornstein & Quevillon, 1976; Glynn & Thomas, 1974; Glynn et al., 1973), behavior analysts specifically train others to live their own lives in more behavior-analytic ways. The ways in which behavior analysts interact—seeing events in terms of discriminative stimuli, operants, and reinforcers, arranging contingencies, etc.—are often effective at solving behavioral problems and preserving desired changes. Accordingly, interacting behavior-analytically is a value that likely outcompetes less effective alternatives naturally established in the cultural auspices of clients. If individuals in a community allocate more time interacting behavior-analytically than in accordance with two or more other values (e.g., “interacting in a religious way”), then cultural diversity has been decreased. Doing so may be instrumental for solving problems a community identifies as problematic, but—like with ACT—there are essentially no data on whether the diffusion of behavior-analytic values throughout a community disturbs the allocation of other values across individuals or the dynamics of interindividual interactions and relationships over the long-term. In the absence of these data, researching informed choice may be invaluable for helping clients recognize how interacting behavior-analytically may transform their communities outside of therapeutic contexts. We—or, at least behavioral scientists who value cultural diversity—cannot let promoting culturally-responsive behavioral services become an operant (reinforced by previously unavailable, culturally-diverse clients) that decreases cultural diversity we purportedly value.

Conclusion

This paper explored ways in which absurdist constructs—sharing some similarity in form and logic with those found in CoBS—may be helpful in orienting to ethical issues largely overlooked in CoBS, behavior analysis, and other forms of behavioral science. Camus’s quantity-over-quality position facilitates contact with a different way to conceptualize psychological flexibility, one that considers what it means to make an informed choice among alternative values. Reaching this position is related to recognizing parallels between how Camus discusses values and how they are discussed in CoBS. At this position, certain alternative courses of action are available. In addition to what they are already doing, scientist-practitioners may benefit from (1) investigating how individuals relationally (or referentially) recognize different courses of action with respect to their participation within cultural systems comprising interindividual interactions, (2) ethically collecting data on whether ACT and other behavioral technologies foster the homogenization of values, and (3) designing analytic tools to evaluate behavioral theories and constructs with respect to possible changes in cultural auspices to which their use might be functionally related. It is not enough to rationalize behavioral technology by social demand, especially when one recognizes multi-level selection and competition among human groups (S. Hayes et al., 2012). When scientific construction is highly sensitive to social demand that changes across time, space, and groups, scientists should recognize that what is good for one group (whether in terms of collectivities or organisms; L. Hayes et al., 1994) may not be good for another or the same group changing across time. There may be no absolute values to guide the ethicality of practices within CoBS, but scientific activities and the products they produce cannot be separated from ethical and political circumstances. It is incumbent upon scientist-practitioners to critically evaluate how their activities are related to these circumstances, articulate their values, and act accordingly in a consistent way throughout the enterprise—especially with respect to the degree to which their activities may constrict cultural diversity. Not doing so more systematically may ultimately pose significant barriers that prevent scientist-practitioners from accomplishing their aims and living in accordance with their values,

whether those pertain to decreasing suicidality or influencing other changes individuals allocate time to within the enterprise.

CoBS is a science of prediction and influence over human behavior. More so than many other sciences are able to, contextual behavioral scientists should be able to predict cultural changes their constructs participate in. Not monitoring how CoBS and other behavioral sciences may participate in damaging groups by homogenizing cultural diversity is just as inexcusable as excusing past behavior because it occurred in a different time, saying that the good accomplished through current practices outweighs the bad, or stating they cannot use tools they have already constructed to work toward this value. CoBS is more than capable; they are already predicting actualized benefits their science has on society. This paper is just trying to push CoBS to institutionalize a greater effort toward more nuanced issues concerning relations between values and scientific activity.

Pioneered through the work of S. Hayes and many other collaborators, CoBS offers a great deal of promise toward constructing a science “more adequate to the challenges of the human condition” (S. Hayes et al., 2012, p. 2) that can “*foster freedom and dignity*” (S. Hayes, 2015, p. xxi, italics in original) in a way other behavioral sciences cannot. Given that one recognizes human behavior as language (Ribes-Iñesta, 2006), RFT, ACT, and other constructs of CoBS are perfectly capable of being utilized to construct methods for predicting cultural change produced through their own scientific activity. If they are not, scientist-practitioners within CoBS should reconsider the extent to which they work with people, because to intentionally participate in changing the behavior of people is to intentionally participate in cultural change (Wilson et al., 2015). To think otherwise is absurd.

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