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Interpersonal Closeness and Conflict in Interbehavioral Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an interbehavioral conceptualization of interpersonal relationships, emphasizing both interpersonal closeness and conflict. In doing so, processes of association and subsequent substitution of stimulus function are described, setting the foundation for an analysis of how relationships are formed from an interbehavioral perspective. Specific attention is given to factors that impact intimacy and closeness in relationships, especially ways in which closeness may be fostered and conflict made more likely. The topic of communication is addressed, and possible therapeutic targets are highlighted from a novel conceptual context. The analysis is contrasted with more traditional ways of thinking, including more common behavior analytic perspectives. The implications of adopting the proposed interbehavioral conceptualization are provided.

Key words: conflict, interbehaviorism, interpersonal closeness, intimacy, relationships.

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Novelty and Significance

What is already known about the topic?

- Many researchers have studied relationships and demonstrated the importance of relationships in human life.
- Some behavior analysts have developed theories and conducted experiments focused on particular skills associated with relationships.

What this paper adds?

- This paper provides a conceptual analysis of how relationships develop in natural science perspective.
- Specific attention is given to processes that facilitate and hinder relationship quality.

Interpersonal relationships are fundamental to most areas of human life. For example, humans often have relationships of some sort with their family members, co-workers, friends, and significant others (i.e., spouses and partners). While these broad categories probably capture the most significant relationships in the lives of humans, relationships seem to be present in even more areas of everyday life. Indeed, people interact with other people all day long, and may develop relationships of some sort with anyone with whom they interact on a regular basis. Some relationships are obvious, as when two individuals are in a romantic relationship, whereas others are less clear, as when someone has a friendly relationship with a barista at a coffee shop that they frequent. In this sense relationships of various sorts are both multitudinous and pervasive.

Relationships are not only pervasive in the lives of humans, but they also have a significant impact on those lives. A great deal of research has examined the extent to which relationships impact health and quality of life. For example, relationship quality

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has been found to be associated with patterns of sleep, with positive relationships being associated with better sleep and negative relationships associated with worse sleep (e.g., Chen, Waite, & Lauderdale, 2015; Kent, Uchino, Cribbet, Bowen, & Smith, 2014). In addition to sleep, relationship quality has also been found to be associated with improved cardiovascular health (Donoho, Seeman, Sloan, & Crimmins, 2015) and reduced disability (Choi, Yorgason, & Johnson, 2016). Marital quality has been the subject of much research, and while there is still much to learn, this literature generally points to an association between better relationship quality and better health (Robles, 2014; Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014). Importantly, the negative impact of a strained relationship can extend beyond the individuals in the relationship, such that the most recent *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V) includes a condition reflecting this circumstance called “Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress” (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016). Relationships of all sorts seem to impact quality of life. For instance, Vaughn, Drake, and Haydock (2016) found negative workplace relationships to be associated with poor mental health of college students. While a thorough overview of all of the research in this area is far beyond the scope of the present paper, these examples highlight the fact that relationship quality impacts the lives of humans in important ways.

Given all of this, the topic of relationships warrants attention from behavior scientists. Of particular importance is the consideration of factors that might impact the quality of relationships, as relationship quality has been shown to be associated with many socially significant outcomes (see above). This aim seems to be particularly well aligned with the goals of behavior analytic approaches, as behavioral approaches specifically aim to understand how the environment may be altered to influence behavior in socially significant ways (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968; Wolf, 1978). Despite this, little conceptual work has focused on relationships within behavior analysis (Some attention has been given to the topic of the therapist-client relationship within behavior analysis, especially within Functional Analytic Psychotherapy. For example, Follette, Naugle, and Callaghan (1996) provided an analysis of the therapeutic relationship in radical behavioral perspective). The present paper describes a behavioral conceptualization of interpersonal relationships and emphasizes factors that contribute to relationship closeness and conflict. Important assumptions about the subject-matter of behavior analysis are considered and implications are highlighted. The analysis is pursued from an interbehavioral perspective (Kantor, 1953, 1958), and in the following section a brief overview of interbehavioral foundations that are fundamental to the understanding of relationships is provided.

INTERBEHAVIORAL PSYCHOLOGY

Developed by JR Kantor (1958), interbehavioral psychology is an organized, systemic approach to the science of psychology. Derived from a unique philosophy of science, interbehaviorism (Kantor, 1953), Kantor’s approach to the discipline of psychology is entirely naturalistic. One implication of this is that all philosophical and discipline specific constructs are derived from contacts with events in the natural world (Kantor, 1957; Smith, 2007). More plainly, this means that assumptions about the world (including behavior), and constructs employed for analytical purposes are all based upon things confronted in the world.

This stands in contrast to more typical methods of developing constructs throughout psychology and the social sciences more broadly; the majority of the social sciences *impose* constructs on events rather than derive constructs *from* events (Smith, 2007). This is seen in the great many dualistic constructs that dominate the helping professions and social sciences. For example, personalities, minds, psyches and the like are often assumed to reside within individuals, and to determine individuals' behavior, despite those very things never having been observed in the world. While the requirement that all constructs be derived from events factors largely into most varieties of behaviorism, its thorough appreciation seems to be unique to interbehaviorism. Interbehaviorists also conceptualize behavior itself in a unique way, as *interbehavior*.

The Psychological Event

As denoted by the word *interbehavioral*, interbehavioral psychology places special emphasis on the interaction between stimulation and responding as a *single event* (stimulation \longleftrightarrow responding). This is contrasted with other ways of conceptualizing behavior, where stimulation is thought to *elicit* responding (Stimulus \rightarrow Response; as in respondent conditioning) or where behavior is thought to be occasioned by stimuli and then change the environment in some way that reinforces or punishes the response (Stimulus \rightarrow Behavior \rightarrow Consequence; as in operant conditioning). While the detailed implications of these various ways of thinking about behavior may be debated, the explicit focus on stimulation and responding as an interaction is a fundamental feature of interbehavioral psychology.

Not only are stimulation and responding conceptualized as an event, but that event also includes a complex field of other factors (Kantor, 1958). That is to say, interactions of stimulation and responding occur in particular settings, and the interactional setting, including all of an individual's history with respect to it, also participates in each psychological event. Importantly, interbehaviorists avoid assigning causal roles to any of the factors that participate in this multi-factored field of interaction (Fryling & Hayes, 2011; Hayes, Adams, & Dixon, 1997). The event orientation of interbehavioral psychology underscores the thoroughly contextual and multi-factored nature of the subject-matter of behavior science. Particularly relevant to the analysis of relationships is the interbehavioral conceptualization of stimulus substitution (Kantor, 1924).

Stimulus Substitution

Individual behavior is functionally related to a great many things in the environment, and many of these things are considered stimuli in behavioral perspective. Keys on the keyboard stimulate typing, cups stimulate grasping, spoken words stimulate hearing, and so on. These examples depict how the physical properties of the objects with which we interact can determine the sort of responses we may have with respect to them. We can only grasp a cup or type on a keyboard in so many ways, and these ways depend on the physical properties of the stimuli themselves. This sort of stimulus function might be considered direct (Hayes, 1992a).

While a great deal of human behavior consists of interactions with the direct stimulus properties of objects, even more behavior seems to occur with respect to the indirect, or substitute stimulus functions that objects develop by virtue of their historical relationships with other stimuli. That is, a great deal of our behavior occurs with respect to aspects of our environment that are not physically present, through the outcome of

present stimulus objects having developed the psychological functions of absent stimulus objects. When present stimuli develop the psychological functions of absent stimuli, we may say that present stimuli are *substituting* for absent stimuli (Kantor, 1924, pp. 50-51). This sort of stimulus substitution develops through the process of an individual responding with respect to spatiotemporal associations conditions (Kantor, 1924, p. 316) in a multi-factored context. Associations conditions may occur among stimuli and stimuli, stimuli and settings, stimuli and responses, responses and responses, responses and settings, and settings and settings (Kantor, 1924, p. 321). Importantly, conditions of association *alone* do not result in the development of substitute stimulus functions; an individual *must also respond with respect to those association conditions* for substitute stimulus functions to develop (e.g., observe them, describe them; e.g., Fryling, Johnston, & Hayes, 2011). This issue is particularly key to understanding relationships.

As an example of this process, an individual may observe stimulus A to occur in a context with stimulus B, and, as a consequence of observing this association stimulus A may develop the functions of B; A(B), and B may develop the functions of A; B(A) (see L Hayes, 1992a -Here the direct stimulus functions are outside of the parentheses and the indirect or substitute stimulus functions are inside of the parentheses). Importantly, and consistent with the natural science aims of behavioral approaches, stimulus substitution also seems to explain some of the most complex human activity without resorting to hypothetical constructs, and underlies processes involved in stimulus equivalence and derived relational responding research more broadly (Hayes, 1992a). That is, stimulus substitution provides a way to explain complex human behavior without violating fundamental behavioral assumptions about the subject-matter.

Some examples from everyday life may make the relevance of this process more obvious; the topic of memory especially highlights substitution processes (Fryling & Hayes, 2010). Revisiting a place where one previously lived often involves many instances of substitution. For example, many adults move away from the specific neighborhood where they spent their childhood, and a great many association conditions occurred in the childhood context. Association conditions in the childhood context likely involved various people being associated with places, activities, buildings, and more. As a consequence of this, while visiting one's childhood neighborhood or home as an adult one may think about their neighbors, friends, teachers, and experiences there in general. What is most interesting from a conceptual standpoint, and a point about which theories in psychology differ, is how it is that someone responds with respect to something that is not currently present. Surely one's childhood teachers are not physically present when they are being remembered while driving by a school one attended years ago. The question becomes: What is the individual responding to and how is this to be conceptualized? In this particular case, the school itself (now present) may have developed the psychological stimulus functions of the things it has been associated with in the past (the teacher). That is, the past is made present through substitution processes; the school has become the teacher, psychologically speaking (Hayes, 1992b). Similar analyses could be made of thinking about a previous dinner date while at a familiar restaurant, and even observing what another person is thinking, as with perspective-taking (DeBernardis, Hayes, & Fryling, 2014; Fryling & Hayes, 2014).

It is these latter topics, the observation of thoughts and perspective-taking that are especially pertinent to the conceptualization of interpersonal relationships. Similar to the examples presented so far, over the course of developing a relational history with another person (responding with respect to association conditions involving another

person), including observing someone engaging in certain behavior, talking about various events, in particular situations, and more, it becomes possible to observe what someone may be thinking and feeling (Hayes & Fryling, 2009). In this sense, responding with respect to association conditions involving another person is what makes perspective-taking possible. For example, a particular relational history may involve you observing your significant other get very upset whenever a particular topic is discussed. Through such a history you may notice that they are upset when someone who regularly discusses the topic is present in another setting. Likewise, if your relational history with another person involves them discussing how they regularly watched a particular movie with their ex-husband, you may notice that they are thinking about their ex-husband when the movie is mentioned at a later time.

These examples may seem overly simplified, but this is only because traditional, dualistic ways of thinking have overly obfuscated analyses of these topics (i.e., by turning the analysis towards hypothetical constructs). Moreover, association conditions and subsequent stimulus substitution can become incredibly complex. This is especially so when one considers the generalization of substitute stimulus functions (e.g., that a restaurant that is only somewhat physically similar to a restaurant at which you had a date with a particular person may remind you of that person). A consideration of stimulus substitution processes has unique implications for understanding relationships, highlighting factors that may influence relationship quality in both positive and negative ways. The following section considers the specific implications of this analysis for understanding relationships with others.

CONCEPTUALIZING RELATIONSHIPS

As described thus far, association conditions are pervasive throughout the lives of people. That is, things occur in relation to other things, in contexts, and therefore develop the stimulus functions of other things in those contexts and vice-versa. As a result, many things develop the psychological functions of other things. In fact, any object could stimulate a response to any other object (or circumstance stimulate a response to any other circumstance), given an individual has responded with respect to an association condition involving the two things in the past (This is not to suggest that everything becomes everything, or that over time stimuli develop the substitute stimulus functions of everything they have ever been associated with. Rather, particular substitute stimulus functions participate in unique event fields, and specific substitute stimulus functions are actualized in these unique settings). Of course, these association conditions also include people; part of what participates in association conditions is the behavior of people with whom we interact. As previously described, a particular setting may stimulate seeing someone who one visited that setting with in the past, despite the fact that the person is no longer present in the setting. Similarly, the behavior of someone we have a relationship with may stimulate responding to other things (e.g., remembering a previous argument), depending on our history with that particular behavior. As substitution processes involve a history of responding with respect to relations among stimuli, a shared history with another person is a fundamental requirement of developing a relationship with them. The following section elaborates on the role of shared histories in the development of relationships.

Shared History

Most would probably agree that a significant part of developing a relationship with someone involves understanding their behavior, including their thoughts and feelings. This repertoire is significant because it involves predicting how another person may behave as well as helps people understand how they should best behave towards them. For example, knowing that a friend is under a significant amount of stress helps one be a better friend, and knowing that a significant other is feeling sad or upset may change how one behaves with respect to that person in meaningful ways. Clearly, the understanding of the thoughts and feelings of people we have relationships with is fundamental to the strength of those relationships. This seems likely to be precisely what is referred to when one says that they feel “close” to someone. Further, the absence of such an understanding seems likely to be involved when someone reports to feel “distant” from another person, and is especially prone to participate in situations in which there is relationship conflict.

What is required for an understanding of another’s thoughts and feelings is a *shared* history with another person. Looking closer at what this shared history is comprised of specifically allows us to understand important features of it, including aspects that are essential to promote intimacy and closeness as well as factors that seem related to relationship conflict.

Closeness and Conflict

As described earlier, association conditions lead to the development of substitute stimulus functions when individuals *respond with respect to those association conditions*. Most often, this involves observing association conditions, though associations may also be responded to with hearing, touching, and other responses; the important point is that the relationship among factors is *interacted* with in some way. As the examples thus far have depicted, in the context of relationships responding with respect to association conditions among someone’s behavior and features of the environment results in better responding with respect to that person’s behavior in general. When this happens, one may feel like they are understood, like someone “gets them”. In this sense we may describe relationship closeness as being at least partially a product of observing the behavior of one another person including the detailed circumstances in which it occurs, and therefore increasingly responding to substitute stimulus functions, such as another person’s thoughts and feelings. This way the people involved in the relationship experience an increasingly similar world together, there is a level of understanding, of perspective-taking, established.

By contrast, relationship conflict may be conceptualized as being at least partially attributable to a lack of responding, a lack of observing association conditions that occur with respect to a person in a relationship. Generally speaking, this may occur when one individual behaves with respect to various situations, including discussions about thoughts and feelings in various contexts, about different topics, and more, while the other person in the relationship *fails to respond with respect to those association conditions* (e.g., fails to observe or listen). For example, one person may tell another that they are particularly worried about something that is happening at work, and then later the other person may fail to respond appropriately when the topic is discussed (e.g., provide additional support when someone asks about how work is going). In this

example, there isn't a *shared history*; the worried individual is responding with respect to their environment (i.e., association conditions are occurring and substitute stimulus functions are evolving), but substitute stimulus functions fail to develop for the other person because they are not responding with respect to those association conditions (e.g., as when someone is preoccupied or distracted). As this example highlights, individuals might behave in *proximity* to one another, but not develop a shared history (Note that some individuals *prefer* to avoid having too much of a shared history with others to prevent others from observing their thoughts and feelings. Such is the case of lying, where successful lies depend on the lack of a shared history, and the detection of lies resulting from histories overlapping -see Fryling, 2016). The analysis provided thus far has implications for a number of topics, including the broad topic of communication and the specific topic of private events as embraced by many behavior analysts (e.g., Skinner, 1953, 1974).

COMMUNICATION

Thoughts and feelings are considered to be the causes of other behavior to both lay people and more traditional social scientists. For example, someone may assume that another person yelled at their significant other *because* they felt angry, or that they gave a good speech *because* they felt confident. Moreover, thoughts and feelings are often believed to occur in a non-natural world, a non-physical world, separate from those things that are confrontable to others in the natural world and that are found to exist in the world of nature. This idea, that things in some other world impact things in the natural world, is the philosophy of dualism. Consistent with this line of thinking, if one's thoughts and feelings are to be understood by others, the individual who has those thoughts and feelings must *express* them (i.e., because those thoughts and feelings exist in some other world that only the individual experiencing the thought or feeling can contact). In other words, if closeness depends upon another person understanding how you feel and what you think, then closeness depends upon people sharing their thoughts and feelings with others; communication becomes fundamental.

As described above, behavior analysts eschew dualistic lines of thinking, arguing that it involves circular logic, hypothetical constructs, and is ultimately unhelpful towards a functional analysis of behavior (e.g., Skinner, 1953). Still, many behavior analysts argue that things like thoughts and feelings are private to the individual, though, hence their being called "private" events. Importantly, private events are not considered to be mental happenings or causes of behavior but rather by-products of contingencies of reinforcement and punishment (e.g., Skinner, 1974). Nevertheless, in Skinner's analysis thoughts and feelings remain things that are within the individual and therefore only available to be contacted by the individual experiencing them. Given this, it is not surprising that Skinner also places emphasis on teaching people to talk about their private events (Skinner, 1957, pp. 131-134; 1974, pp. 26-28). To Skinner, learning to talk about private events has important social implications; it helps the verbal community predict and prepare for future behavior (e.g., 1974, p. 25). The important point here is that Skinner's analysis of these issues also places emphasis on the need for the speaker to describe their private experiences. That is, the emphasis is on expressing thoughts and feelings as a means of helping the verbal community predict and prepare for future

behavior, just as with the more traditional dualistic model. The language is different, but the logic is the same.

While communication (e.g., telling other people how you feel) has long been considered to be central to good relationships (e.g., Gottman, Notarius, Gonso, & Markman, 1979), the present analysis extends and elaborates upon some of these long-held assumptions. As described thus far, association conditions and the subsequent development of substitute stimulus functions permit the observation of another person's thoughts and feelings. Observing one's thoughts and feelings facilitates relationship closeness, and the absence of such an observation is likely to participate in relationship conflict. Implied in this is that one's thoughts and feelings are not private in principle, in the sense that they are not able to be contacted by another person. Rather, thoughts and feelings are subtle, public events, available for others to interact with just like other events. The difference being that the observation of such events depends upon a shared relational history (DeBernardis *et alii*, 2014; Hayes & Fryling, 2009). Following from this, a failure to observe another person's thoughts and feelings has nothing to do with their being private, but rather with the absence of a *shared* relational history. Given this, it is not the case that one must always have to discuss their thoughts and feelings over the course of a relationship in order for those thoughts and feelings to be understood. Indeed, over the course of a shared history developing in the context of a relationship more and more of one's thoughts and feelings may be observed, and, presumably, less and less needs to be said about thoughts and feelings that are otherwise assumed to be private (this may happen when couples have been together for extended periods of time).

To be clear, this is not to suggest that discussions of one's thoughts and feelings are not important in the development of relationships. On the contrary, getting to know another person certainly involves many discussions of these sorts. Talking about thoughts and feelings is part of the association conditions that participate in a shared history between an individual and another person. Such discussions involve relations among thoughts and feelings in the context of various topics, in different situations, and more. Of course, as suggested throughout this paper, a shared history requires one to respond with *respect to those association conditions*, that is, to interact with relationships between thoughts and feelings and other things. This is essential to the definition of a *shared* history and to the development of substitute stimulus functions. Surely, the occurrence of such association conditions, and the listener's corresponding responding with respect to those association conditions, greatly enhances relationship closeness as conceptualized in this paper.

The analysis described herein highlights that while talking about one's thoughts and feelings surely has its place in the development of relationships with other people, a *shared history* and the development of substitute stimulus functions is perhaps even more fundamental. This analysis may facilitate the conceptualization of the many mindfulness-based interventions in a conceptually coherent, behavior analytic manner. For example, recent work has emphasized the importance of couples being psychologically present while spending time together (e.g., Walser & Westrup, 2009). In other words, to not just be physically present, but also *psychologically* present, to respond with respect to one another, to develop a *shared history*. This analysis also provides an alternative to traditional ideas in psychology and behavior analysis by specifically focusing on shared history rather than internal events. This focus on shared history has both practical and conceptual implications. As a therapeutic target, the focus may shift towards sharing experiences together and all that this may entail, and analyzing factors that influence this.

Conceptually, the analysis is philosophically coherent and expands the comprehensiveness of the work in behavior analysis. As the field of behavior analysis continues to develop and evolve it is important for an increasingly complex range of topics to be addressed while at the same time honoring our philosophical foundations.

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